

**From Coherence to Coheritization**  
*Explaining the rise of Policy Coherence in EU External Policy*

Master Thesis

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“Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. ... ‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.’ ‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’ ‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master – that’s all.’”

Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*

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## Abstract

Over the past decade, EU external policy has become increasingly entangled by the notion of policy coherence. Previously ‘siloeed’ policy areas such as trade, agriculture, security, and development are increasingly approached as challenges that can only be effectively resolved by addressing their positive and negative interlinkages. While the European Commission is at times critical of the incoherencies that arise out of these interlinked policy areas, it also calls to harness synergies between them. Paradoxically, this approach to policy coherence thus both criticizes and embraces the existing structure of global capitalism. This thesis argues that the Commission’s ambivalent approach to its external policy can be best explained by combining insights from speech act theory and cultural political economy. Agents and structures interact in a perpetual cycle of sense- and meaning-making (semiosis). Speech acts are a way to express, reinforce, or change linguistic and extra-linguistic structures. By that, they have a strong impact on the discursive realm, the institutional structure of the debate and the participation chances of political actors. Through a combination of case study, social network analysis, and interviews, the thesis suggests to understand the creation of policy coherence as a speech act, by which the European Commission (re-)defines itself in relation to less industrialized countries, while at the same time restructuring the discursive and institutional playing field of the European decision-making on external policies.

**Keywords:** *Policy Coherence, PCD, speech act, cultural political economy, development aid, DG DEVCO, semiosis.*

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## Preface

The process of writing this thesis was long, arduous, sometimes frustrating, but ultimately incredibly rewarding. When I wrote my Bachelors thesis over a year ago, the accompanying “inspirational quote” on the first page read: “no effort is worthwhile without some degree of struggle and sacrifice”. That summed up my experience then, and possibly even more so now. Writing and researching can be a lonely endeavor. The amount of people that you can relate your experience to is always limited, and the circle of people who understand what the hell you are actually writing even smaller. At times, this can be demotivating, even disheartening. Especially when you personally consider your role as a researcher to be not just a producer of knowledge, but also someone who should inform debates outside the academe.

Writing this thesis has been an informative business in more ways than I could have imagined beforehand. Of course, you get to learn much more about the topic you pick to investigate and the theories that provide a lens for you to do so. Beyond that, I also chose a fancy-sounding methodology with an even more elegant acronym: discourse network analysis (DNA!). Though this choice is what has ultimately given the thesis much of its empirical weight, it was also challenging since it required using several software packages that I was not familiar with, as well as a scrupulous and seemingly endless review of policy documents.

The preceding observations are completely in line with what I could have expected beforehand. What I did not know that I would learn while writing this thesis, however, is much more interesting. Ambition is a virtue for setting and reaching your goals in life, but in my case, it frequently stifled my progress entirely. Quite often, I simply did not dare to start or resume work out of fear that it would not live up to my own standards. I also consciously decided to take more time to finish my Masters degree than the nominal year, so that I would have more time to really write the perfect thesis, but what I found is that life has a way of always occupying your agenda no matter how long you take. Additionally, since I was under less time pressure to write my Master’s thesis, that allowed for a fair amount of procrastination. Furthermore, while writing the Bachelors thesis, I had a “partner in crime” in Vincent Thepass, who wrote on a similar topic and used a similar theoretical perspective. Not having that for the Masters thesis was a serious bummer. What I had to really learn was three things. One, you will probably never write the perfect thesis, so stop obsessing over this delusion. Two, it is much better to have less time but efficiently utilized than oceans of time utilized poorly. Three, if you have the possibility of working with a soul-mate in these kinds of processes: use it!

This is not to say that the process of writing a Master’s thesis is always dark, and full of terrors. Quite the contrary, during the final months I became more efficient in managing my time, and I actually quite enjoyed the process on a more regular basis.

There are many people who need to be thanked for the positive role that they played in shaping that thesis. First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Thomas Eimer. Thomas, the many profound and thoroughly interesting and enjoyable discussions we have had have enabled this thesis to become the product that I had hoped for from the beginning. I want to thank you for allowing me to develop the ideas and ambitions that I had into the thesis that I could have only hoped to write. I also want to thank you for providing supervision after the official time-frame. Without this flexibility, the thesis would not have been possible. I also want to thank you for the many times where you provided suggestions, comments, and criticisms that added additional layers of sophistication to the argumentation, and for the non-directive and provocative way in which you provided the feedback. This provided the intellectual challenge and space to autonomously develop the ideas upon our discussions.

Beyond Thomas, I would especially like to thank Luuk de Cock for reading my entire thesis and providing many valuable comments and suggestions, and my brother Tijn who helped me out with correcting and formatting my many, many references in  $\text{\LaTeX}$ . I would also like to thank my friends and family for providing support. Finally, I would like to thank my interview partners for their time and generous aid in the quest to find an explanation for the matters of this thesis.

The only thing that remains is to express my hope that you will find this thesis an interesting, insightful, and hopefully even provocative piece of writing. I could hope for no more.

## **Index of acronyms**

ACP	Asian-, Caribbean, and Pacific Nations
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DAC	Development-Assistance Committee
DG	Directorates-General of the European Commission
DG DEVCO	Directorates-General for International Cooperation and Development
EC	European Commission
ECD	European Consensus on Development
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GSP	Generalized System of Preferences
HTW	How to do Things with Words
IA	Impact Assessment
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PCD	Policy Coherence for Development
PCSD	Policy Coherence for Sustainable Development
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SNA	Social Network Analysis
TTIP	Transatlantic Trade- and Investment Partnership
UN	United Nations

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## 1. Introduction

Over the course of the last decade, the European Union's (EU) external policies have become increasingly entangled by the notion of 'policy coherence' (for development) (Carbonne, 2008; Orbie, 2012; Sianes, 2017; European Commission, 2015). In a nutshell, coherence is the mantra in which external policies are simultaneously assessed for their potential to foster 'synergies' between developmental policies and broader commercial- and security policies, whilst also stressing that incoherencies hampering those same developmental goals should be avoided (European Commission, 2017). In the words of the European Commission (EC): "[Coherence] is fundamental if the EU is not to take with one hand what it gives with the other, but rather integrate development objectives into its trade, agriculture, environment, migration and asylum, and security and defense policies so that these policies contribute to and do not undermine development" (EC 2005b: 13). At the same time, "development can only take place under certain economic conditions (free trade and market economy)" (Siitonen, 2016: 5). However, the EU's approach to policy coherence does not fundamentally call in to question these liberalization policies (Thede, 2013: 790), even though the inimical nature of the current political economic framework to developing countries is broadly documented (Hunter Wade, 2003; Marois & Pradella, 2015; Ryner & Cafuny, 2016: 194-222). In other words: commercial policies may do no harm to development interests, but they also cannot not be perceived as adversarial to broader external goals in relation to developing countries. This raises the question: if coherence cannot be reached, why is the EU pursuing it?

Although policy coherence was instigated in the Maastricht Treaty, it initially existed only as rhetoric in the text to acknowledge the failure of structural adjustment in the previous decade, and Commission and Member States only paid lip service to it throughout the 1990s (Hoebink, 2004; Siitonen, 2016: 7-8). The Commission took over a decade before it actively pursued coherence as a major foreign policy goal. Since the 2005 European Consensus on Development (ECD) – a joint document between Commission, Parliament, and Council – policy coherence for development (PCD) has become one of the foremost tools shaping EU external policy.

Post-2005, the notion of PCD has increasingly evolved from rhetoric towards a discourse that enables a transformation of the institutional structure the debate around EU external policy. Beyond the EU-institutions, civil society organizations (CSOs) and corporate actors alike have embraced PCD as a means to channel their positions on the effects of EU external policy (Sianes, 2017; Carbonne & Keijzer, 2016). Within academic debates, coherence has prominently featured as part of the 'beyond aid' discourse that shapes expert-level thinking on development (Janus et al, 2015; Carbonne, 2012). Beyond discourse, the Commission has put in place institutional mechanisms such as Impact Assessments (IAs) and joint programming that are meant to increase coherence between its external

policies (Carbonne, 2016: 15-18; Bartels, 2016). On top of PCD's increasing importance in EU development policy, it has also spread to other areas such as Trade and the Commission's neighborhood policy (European Commission, 2015; 2018). Furthermore, EU development agents (NGOs and the Commission) have successfully integrated policy coherence in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (interview 2; 3). The Agenda 2030 makes extensive reference to the interlinkages between all policy areas and promotes policy coherence for (sustainable) development as a means to make the most these interlinkages (United Nations, 2018). The primacy of the SDGs in shaping the discourse around and policies towards development epitomizes the importance of policy coherence. Beyond enabling new trajectories of action, coherence also constrains actors because it redefines what is discursively, institutionally, and *semiotically* permeable, forcing agents to think and act along these ways. As such, we have arguably gone from *coherence* – a rhetorical means to tacitly acknowledge that full liberalization is detrimental to the development trajectory of less industrialized countries – towards *coheritization* – a way to discursively and institutionally shape the totality of EU external policy by defining policies on a continuum from incoherent to coherent (with market-led trajectories).

The proliferation of policy coherence raises questions as to its true goal, because to a large extent, it is inherently contradictory. On the one hand, PCD implicitly acknowledges that the (Post) Washington Consensus model of full liberalization is not beneficial for developing countries by definition. On the other hand, it rather paradoxically states that these deficits should be overcome by harnessing the very policies that produced them in the first place (Carbonne & Orbie, 2014: 2; Negre, 2013). In brief, this is the *coherence paradox* that is central to this thesis to resolve. In particular, it is crucial to uncover what has given coherence its expediency to expand to its current scope in spite of (or possibly due to) its oxymoronic nature. Thus far, the academic literature has only provided piecemeal and incomplete explanations that do no justice to the full extent of coherence in terms of scope and in terms of its simultaneous existence as discourse and social practice. To fill this gap, the thesis aims to answer the following research question:

*What explains the expanding use of “coherence” as a signifier for EU external policy vis-à-vis less industrialized nations?*

Although an explanation of the rise of policy coherence is lacking, coherence has received significant scholarly attention. However, the wealth of work mostly focuses on explaining how coherence has manifested and how incoherencies between policy areas arise (Forster & Stokke, 1999; OECD, 2003: 2; Hoebink, 2004; Picciotto, 2005; Carbonne, 2008; Alonso et al, 2010; Furness & Gänzle, 2017; Sianes, 2017). Nevertheless, several tentative explanations for why PCD has become popular have arisen in the literature over the years. They can be grouped in three categories.

First, there are institutionalist authors such as Hoebink (1999; 2004), who see incoherencies as an inherent consequence of the differing interests, parties, and pressure groups arising out of a pluralist society. Governments are not regarded as unitary actors and as such, cannot be perceived as monolithic entities seeking to instrumentally maximize utility towards a common goal. Out of the interactions between and within (institutionalized) actors, contradictions can arise either by intention or unintendedly. On the one hand, the complexity of policy choices means one cannot always foresee the consequences of a policy choice, which means that different policies may inadvertently contradict one another. On the other hand, conscious decisions that lead to incoherencies can be made when one policy area (e.g., agricultural subsidies) supersede others (e.g., development policy) (Hoebink, 1999: 329). As for the instigation of policy coherence itself, Carbone (2008: 326) argues that coherence is a political imperative because incoherence undermines the EU's credibility as an international actor. Moreover, institutionalist authors argue that institutions at the center always strive for more coherent policies, and policy coherence has been a way for the Commission to take on a more central role in shaping EU external (development) policy (Forster & Stokke, 1999: 19-20; see also Orbie, 2012). As such, it is no coincidence that the rise of PCD has (for the most part) coincided with consequent rounds of European integration.

Milewicz et al (2016) offer a different institutionalist perspective by examining the increasing tendency to connect non-commercial issues such as human rights, environmental standards, and labor standards to trade agreements. They argue that increasing complexity of the international sphere has led to increasing pressure on governments to include such diverse issues in trade agreements. Their argument holds that an incremental expansion of non-trade issues through bilateral treaties has facilitated path-dependencies that interlock countries towards coherence in new, plurilateral agreements such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Unfortunately, their data only goes back to 2009, and the exclusively quantitative nature of their study does not provide a comprehensive and sufficiently deep understanding of the proliferation of coherence. Moreover, their argument focuses on path-dependency, which does not resolve the coherence paradox, since path-dependencies do not create themselves, but are rather a fortuitous consequence of the cause under investigation here.

The second group of explanations comprises rational choice authors. Furness and Gänzle (2017) explain the existence of policy coherence from a public choice perspective. Their argument centers on how public goods challenges arise out of the distribution of costs and benefits of policies. When the benefits are concentrated along a small constellation of actors, strong incentives to act collectively exist. However, with decentralized costs and benefits, incentives towards collective action are low (Ostrom, 2014; Furness & Gänzle, 2017: 478; Gebhard, 2011). Importantly, coherence is not considered a

natural state of affairs. For instance, interests of the defense industry most likely do not align with actors seeking stability in fragile states. As such, oftentimes there are no obvious benefits for groups of actors with opposing interests to pursue a coherent external policy, as it likely entails a zero-sum game for at least one actor. Therefore, rational choice authors argue that coherence is a political decision that requires institutional attunement to incentivize desired policy outcomes (Furness & Gänzle, 2017: 479). However, rational choice scholars do not provide an explanation for why it is in the interest of governmental actors to promote increased policy coherence in the first place.

Third and finally, authors such as Thede (2013), Siitonen (2016:5-6), and Verschaeve et al (2016) provide a critical political economy perspective. For them, the increasing reference to policy coherence is a way to organize the development sphere by subverting it to commercial- and security interests (Chandler, 2007). Specifically, through prioritizing disbursement of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to 'whole of government' approaches that prioritize diplomatic, defense, and trade interests, the extent to which developing countries can deviate from market-led trajectories of development vastly narrows (Thede, 2013: 796-797). Adding on this, Siitonen (2016: 5) contends that Western donors already succeed in having well-coordinated policies, but are in need of a new way to coherently signal these policies to the developing world. To this end, PCD can reinvigorate the economic (market-led and growth oriented) and political (democracy and good governance) conditions for development by inventing a new rhetorical signifier that recommits developing countries to the same old trajectories (ibid.). In effect, this secures market-led trajectories and political stability in developing countries, thereby providing a more predictable and stable environment to capitalist forces. Finally, Verschaeve et al (2016) argue that the notion of PCD may be used as a legitimization to phase-out ODA altogether (see also Delputte et al, 2015).

Although the preceding discussion has shown that several tentative explanations for the rise of policy coherence exist, they suffer from a number of shortcomings. First, authors usually fail to strike a proper balance between discourse, institutions, power-relations and structures. By prioritizing one over the other, valuable insights into PCD's increasing importance remain obscured. For instance, critical authors implicitly convey the message that PCD can simply be explained as a rhetorical device produced by powerful actors to reproduce their hegemonic position. In the process, the way in which PCD has structured the debate, how civil society organizations have affected and are affected by PCD, and effects on policies are lost. At the same time, institutionalist and rational choice authors place too much emphasis on the institutional side. Their approach remains quite descriptive because it focuses on pre-defined interests, power relations, and institutional dimensions. Moreover, in the case of rational choice theory, actor's interests are reduced to endogenous manifestations of exogenous constraints (Green & Shapiro, 1994). Thereby, they fail to recognize the complex and variegated

ways in which agents and structures interact and why certain courses of actions are enabled and constrained over time. Second, existing literature does not observe both the true scope and *unidirectional* nature of PCD. Instead of uncovering why coherence is increasingly embraced by non-development actors such as DG Trade, the scope remains confined to studying PCD in the development sphere. Indeed, policy coherence is still studied as no more than policy coherence for *development*. Third, the inherently contradictory nature of PCD in its current form is neither problematized nor linked to possible explanations of its rising importance. A full account for the rise of coherence should show why – in spite of, or *exactly because of* – its inconsistent nature, it has become so widespread among EU external policy. Forth and finally, the multi-causal and historicized complexity that underpins the rise of PCD is – with the exception of Verschaeve et al (2016) – not captured in current scholarly literature. A comprehensive account for the rise of policy coherence needs a perspective that can capture the interlinkages between agency and structure, and between the material and ideational.

In light of all this, the central claim of this thesis is that policy coherence should be conceptualized as both a discourse and a social practice if one seeks to fully understand its expanding salience and scope. The aim of this study is to account for PCD's expansion and to resolve the coherence paradox. To this end, a new and comprehensive theoretical framework and methodological approach should be employed. These will now be outlined.

Where does one start in developing a causally complex theoretical framework that equally values all dimensions of social reality? In line with Robert Cox's famous assertion that "[o]ntology lies at the beginning of any enquiry" (Cox & Sinclair, 1996: 144), this thesis will build its theoretical framework on critical realism (Archer et al, 2013). Critical realism is the perfect framework to overcome the ontological and theoretical frameworks as outlined above. It assumes a stratified ontology where the causal and stochastic powers of the material and ideational are equally valued (Sayer, 2000). Moreover, critical realism provides ample space to analyze the full extent of social relations in their respective historical contexts, thereby overcoming the ontological shortcomings of institutionalist and rationalist approaches. On top of this foundation, the theoretical framework will combine insights from speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and cultural political economy (Sum & Jessop, 2013) to fully account for the 'how' and 'why' of policy coherence's proliferation. Consistent with critical realism, speech act theory holds that deep-seated mechanisms with causal powers affecting social outcomes exist. Every speech act consists of an illocutionary act (the speaker's motivation), a locutionary act (the message), and a perlocutionary act (the effect on the hearer) (Green, 2015). Crucially, only some speech acts may be successful dependent on the spatio-temporal context of their utterance. At the same time, agents can use speech acts to enact changes to the mechanisms underpinning social reality (Flores Farfan & Holzscheiter, 2010).

Policy coherence may be interpreted as a speech act with its distinct illocutionary motivation and perlocutionary effect. Subsequently, the coherence speech act may have paved the way for a redefinition of EU external policy vis-à-vis less industrialized countries, reshaping discursive and institutional structures in the process. However, speech act theory remains unclear as to why speakers hold their illocutionary motivations, why only some perlocutionary acts are successful, and why a new social reality can emanate from successful speech acts and their hereto-related contextual determinants (Balzacq, 2004; 2010; Stritzel, 2007: 358). As such, it is insufficient on its own accord to account for the explanandum. Therefore, this thesis also draws from cultural political economy (Sum & Jessop, 2013). Cultural political economy (CPE) is a variation of critical political economy that emphasizes the role of language, meanings, and discourse in the perpetual imbalances of and contestations around global capitalism. CPE fits its theoretical role perfectly because it provides space for both the material and ideational, and agency and structures, while grounding this in a historicized logic. Its notion of *semiosis* – the idea that social reality is underpinned by a perpetual yet open-ended process of sense- and meaning-making (Ibid: 3-4) – is particularly relevant in combining the insights of speech act theory and critical political economy.

### *Research strategy*

To analyze the critical speech act framework, a threefold methodology will be employed. First, a discourse network analysis will be performed (See Leifeld, 2013: 5-8; Leifeld & Haunss, 2012: 390-393; Muller, 2015; Leifeld, 2017). This is a novel method to study both the direction and crucially, the *temporality* in which specific claims have flown within a network, such as the network of actors around EU development policy. Discourse network analysis provides the epistemological middle-ground where the applied theoretical framework will thrive. Both theories contain a relational component which, in the case of speech act theory is the relation between speaker and hearer and in the case of cultural political economy, are power relations in the broadest sense. Next, an explanatory narrative that focuses on primary (policy) documents, scientific- and grey literature provides a historicized account for the rise of PCD. Third and finally, a number of expert interviews with key representatives from all sides (DG DEVCO, DG Trade, NGOs and think tanks) will validate the empirical observations and provide new insights of their own. These three steps provide the necessary tools to comprehensively study the multiple causes of policy coherence's emergence.

### *Relevance*

This thesis forms contributes to scientific debates around coherence and development policy in general in a number of ways. First, it takes a more comprehensive approach to explain the proliferation of policy coherence. By doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of the phenomenon. Second,

it provides a much-needed account explaining *why* coherence is on the rise. Third, cultural political economy permeates a more comprehensive *Ideologiekritik* to both challenge and advance academic and societal debates (Sum & Jessop, 2013: 4). Fourth, it employs an innovative theoretical and methodological framework. Theoretically, this thesis approaches the explanandum with a synthesis of speech act theory and cultural political economy, thereby offering a novel way to study the topic and to employ these theories. Methodologically, speech act theory in the social sciences is usually studied by interpretative scholars through a combination of discourse analysis, ethnographic research, and content analysis (Balzacq, 2010: 31). More systematic methodologies are usually eschewed. By investigating the claim that coherence is a speech act with both quantitative and qualitative methodology, this thesis aims to provide an original addition to the repertoire of how speech acts can be studied.

Beyond the scientific relevance in investigating the rise of policy coherence, this thesis importantly also contributes to societal debates. After the global financial crisis, the trend of decreasing aid budgets has further accelerated. As a consequence of the EU-wide mantra of austerity measures, aid budgets were often among the first items to be cut (Delputte et al. 2015). At the same time, it is certainly true that the current scheme of development aid is insufficient, since aid is provided based on country-level income data, even though three quarters of the world's poor people live in middle-income countries (Carbonne & Orbie, 2014: 2). Coherence nowadays is presented as a transformative tool that can mitigate these deficiencies and even replace ODA, while also overcoming negative effects of external non-developmental policies. However, the Commission's current interpretation of coherence seems to subvert development goals by giving primacy to both economic- and security goals. As such, this thesis can inform the public debate by showing the intrinsic limitations of a coherence that cannot take away the structural causes behind poverty. At the same time, more areas, even traditionally-considered internal policy domains such as monetary and fiscal policies have increasingly global and destabilizing effects on the Global South (Marois & Pradella, 2015: 6-7; Saad-Filho, 2016), illustrating that the need to pursue a different coherence might be greater than ever.

### *Thesis outline*

This thesis will consist of four further chapters. In chapter 2, speech act theory and critical theory are synthesized into a perspective that explains the proliferation and expansion of policy coherence. Chapter 3 is structured around three central theory-informed propositions that subsequently shape the epistemological and methodological framework. Additionally, the chapter outlines the research strategy, and operationalizes core concepts. Next, chapter 4 contains the analysis, which is divided into three sections; one for every phase in the process from coherence to coheritization. The coherence paradox is resolved in chapter 5 by means of answering the research question. Finally, the thesis closes by reflecting on its academic and social relevance and by proposing avenues for future research.

## 2. Theoretical discussion

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework to answer the research question, starting with a discussion on speech act theory. In spite of its promising nature, the chapter takes a critical tone by arguing that speech act theory cannot adequately explain social phenomena because of its ontological nominalism. To overcome this flaw, speech act theory is re-interpreted from a critical realist perspective. Most importantly, the chapter argues that agency and structure and the material-ideational dimensions are connected by a perpetual semiotic cycle of sense- and meaning-making that (re)produces social contexts over time and space. Speech acts are devices for sense- and meaning-making, but do not tell the whole story. Therefore, the chapter also draws from cultural political economy. By rooting speech acts in a historical materialist framework, it becomes clear that struggles around the meaning of social reality are rooted in (class-) struggles over the inherently contradictory nature of capitalism.

### 2.1. *Speech act theory*

This subsection unpacks speech act theory by starting at its philosophical and linguistic roots. Thereafter, the section outlines the main revisions and expansions that have been proposed with the goal to critically evaluate how the theory has been used in political science scholarship.

#### 2.1.1. *(Pre-)Austrian foundations*

To understand speech act theory, one must first take a step back and consider the subject of language. Specifically, how do we use language, what purpose does language serve in the social context, and how does a speaker's utterance influence the hearer? These questions originally pertained to the fields of philosophy and linguistics, specifically the subfield of universal pragmatics<sup>1</sup>. Philosophers initially bestowed little importance upon the use of language. Instead, the dominant logical positivist view at the start of the 20th century saw language solely as an epistemological tool that was necessary to communicate, and only to make true or false statements (Frege, 1892; Russell, 1905; De Saussure, 1916/2011). It was not until the *linguistic turn* in the mid-20th century for things to change. The later Wittgenstein – in disagreement with the younger Wittgenstein – came to challenge these highly procedural notions about the use of language in social contexts (Devitt & Hanley, 2003). According to Wittgenstein, language should be viewed as part of the world, in a constant mutual bond between speaker and his or her social context. Our use of language is not constructed in an isolated place of the mind irrespective of our surroundings, nor is language solely constructed to refer to an outside reality, hence “the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (Wittgenstein, 1953: 20).

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<sup>1</sup>Universal Pragmatics studies language in use and how we transmission meaning through vocal and written language. Crucially, it studies not only the structure of language but also the context in which language is used. See Thomas (1995).

Wittgenstein's work formed the precursor for the newly developing field of ordinary language philosophy. The field is characterized by post-positivist and anti-essentialist views regarding the use of language (Vanderveken & Kubo, 2001: 4). A key belief was that the use and meaning of language are at least partially intertwined, and that the two are context-dependent (Bach, 2003: 162). In contrast to the fragmented and anti-theoretical account of Wittgenstein, John Austin's 1962-book 'how to do things with words' (henceforth: HTW) more systematically examines language in social contexts. Austin criticizes the notion that "the business of a statement can only be to 'describe' some state of affairs, or to 'state some fact', which it must do either truly or falsely" (HTW: 1). According to Austin, this is false, since a statement or *utterance*<sup>2</sup> can be either a constative (a statement of truth) or a *performative* (a statement that leads to an action). In other words, "by saying something, we *do* something" (HTW: 1, emphasis in original). To illustrate, take the following example:

- (a) "You are the King".
- (b) "I hereby proclaim you King".

In (a), the utterance is merely a constative; it is a statement of truth<sup>3</sup>. However in (b), the utterance is a performative, since performing the utterance enacts a real-world effect. This illustrates how utterances can be both constatives and performatives, and that "saying it can make it so".

Speech acts consist of three smaller acts. First, there is the *locutionary* act, in which the speaker formulates his or her utterance in accordance to the rules of grammar. Second, there is the *illocutionary* act, which contains a 'force' which is the goal of the speaker in producing the speech act (e.g., to promise, proclaim, or demand) (HTW: 98-101). Another way to characterize these acts would be to say that the locutionary act corresponds to the (linguistic) *denotation*, i.e., the bijective signifier for an empirical phenomenon, while the illocutionary act corresponds to the *connotation*, i.e., the context-dependent (multiple and oftentimes ambiguous) cognitive and social attributions given to the bijective signifier (Hare, 1970)<sup>4</sup>. Although the denotation-connotation dichotomy predates Austin, the final *perlocutionary* act takes his theory further by making it performative. It entails the reaction that the locutionary act elicits from the interlocutor. Importantly, the perlocutionary act is very heavily context-dependent, as it depends on the context in which the speech act was performed and also on

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<sup>2</sup>By utterances, Austin refers to language in *use*, i.e., not sentences that merely describe (see also Ambroise, 2010: 2).

<sup>3</sup>It should be noted that constatives can only follow from a fact rather than being a precursor for it. In other words, I can make an utterance that adheres to the grammatical rules of a constative, but it must speak to some empirically observable object or phenomenon that can assess its extra-grammatical truth or untruth before we can label it as such (HTW: 4-6).

<sup>4</sup>Yet more ways to classify the locutionary-illocutionary distinction are De Saussure's *langue-parole* (De Saussure, 1916/2011) and Frege's *Sinn und Bedeutung* (Frege, 1892) distinctions.

the interlocutor's personal traits, i.e., possible idiosyncrasies in how one responds to an utterance (HTW: 103-104). The functioning of this triad of acts is captured well by Jürgen Habermas: 'to say *something*, to act *in* saying something, to bring about something *through* acting in saying something' (Habermas, 1984: 289, emphasis in original).

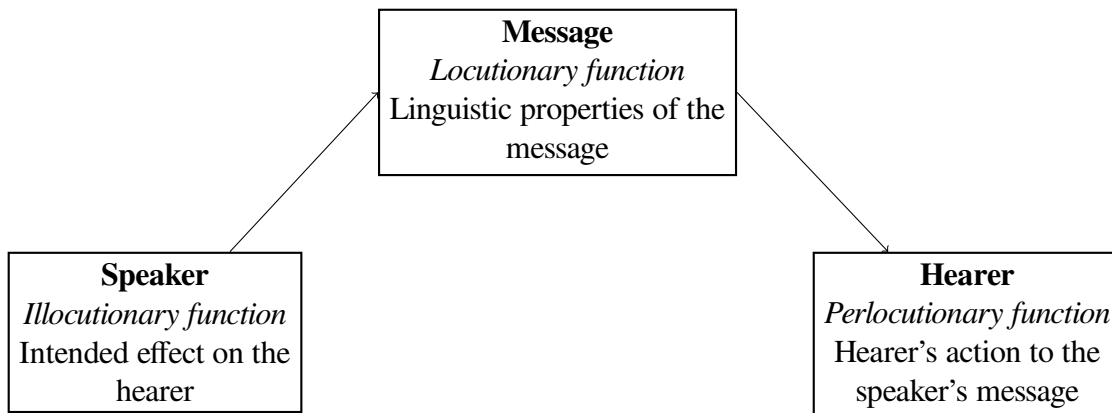
Although this framework enables Austin to construct a systematic analysis for how utterances can produce real-world effects, as he further develops his model of speech acts, he comes to realize that the general constative-performative distinction was a useful heuristic for making his argument, but less useful in analyzing how we use language to express conceptual thoughts (Vanderveken & Kubo, 2001: 4; Sbisà, 2007: 463). According to Austin, *all* utterances are in fact acts that enact a real-world effect, for every utterance is an act of language in use, therefore aiming at accomplishing something (HTW: 67-68; 85; 134-136). In this sense, constatives are nothing more than a special case of performatives (Searle, 1968). Take the following example: if a tour guide informs his travelers that "we will leave in five minutes", his goal is not just to enlighten them of this fact, but also to ensure that their bags are packed so that they actually leave five minutes from the moment of the utterance. Note that the locutionary act ostensibly denotes a constative, even though there are still illocutionary and perlocutionary acts involved in making the statement, and that the statement in itself is also context-dependent. This *proof by contradiction* of Austin's earlier statement leads him from his original distinction to a general theory of speech acts (HTW: 67).

The transition to a general theory of speech acts entails a new way to assess the truth behind utterances. According to Austin (HTW: 45-52), performative language often<sup>5</sup> cannot be true or false, but instead is either successful or unsuccessful, or *felicitous* or *infelicitous*. "I promise I'll come home" is not true or untrue, but whether I do come home makes the act either felicitous or infelicitous. Similarly, the success or felicity of my proclamation of the interlocutor as king necessitates both the right authority and context. However, it cannot be denied that I made the proclamation, and therefore the act itself cannot be 'false'. Austin defines three felicity conditions, which must be adhered fully for the speech act to be successful: (i) the preparatory condition, requiring the speech act to adhere to certain conventional procedures, uttered by the right person in the right circumstance, (ii) the executive condition, which ties speaker and hearer to act in accordance with convention and contents of the speech act, and (iii) the fulfillment condition, requiring all participants to actually follow through on the procedures set out in the speech act (HTW: 14-15). Regarding the consequences that a speech act (felicitous or not) evokes (the perlocutionary act), Austin is far less decisive: "[perlocution is]

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<sup>5</sup>Austin's argumentation is more nuanced than the scope of this section allows to set out. Certain constatives can certainly be said to be true or false (see note 4), but the general take-away message for Austin is that the distinction is unclear and should therefore be replaced by the triad of speech acts.

**Figure 1:** Functions of a speech act



specific to the circumstances of issuance, and is therefore not conventionally achieved just by uttering particular utterances, and includes all those effects, intended or unintended, often indeterminate, that some particular utterances in a particular situation may cause” (ibid: 14-15).

Austin’s systematic account of how language is *used* caused a fundamental change to the predominantly grammarly and non-transcendental way in which language was understood (Vanderveken, 2001: 36). His model was the source of much scholarly debate, not only in philosophy and linguistics, but also as an interdisciplinary study into language of many other fields. The reactions, revisions, and expansions upon Austin’s work form the topic of the next section. As a brief overview, Figure 1 captures Austin’s general theory of speech acts.

### 2.1.2. *Speech act theory after Austin: revisions, expansions, and critique*

This section traces the development of speech act theory after Austin. It will show how the theory was initially revised and refined, and how speech act theory in linguistics became alienated from its origins, leading to problems in assessing the social context from which speech acts arise.

After Austin, work on speech act theory was taken up by his peers, most notably John Searle (1969; 1975; 1989) and Paul Grice (1978; 1989). Searle resolved several ambiguities and inconsistencies in Austin’s theory, including a redefinition of the illocutionary act, and a stricter set of felicity conditions. However, this has been at the cost of the theory’s applicability to understand social phenomena. Regarding the illocutionary act, Searle (1969) distinguishes between illocutionary points and their ‘force’. The former is an abstract category (e.g., to proclaim or to promise) while the latter is a concrete motivation (e.g., getting the interlocutor to perform an action) (Searle, 1979: 3). As for the felicity conditions, on top of Austin’s three conditions (cf. [Section 2.1.1](#)) Searle crucially adds the *sincerity condition*, necessitating the speaker to follow through on his or her intentions as spelled out in the speech act (Searle, 1969). This is closely mirrored in Grice’s cooperative principle which

assumes that speakers and hearer attempt to convey meanings truthfully and clearly (Grice, 1989). As we will see later, it is especially here where speech act theory runs into trouble for the explanandum. Beyond the expansion of categories, Searle also greatly emphasizes the role for these conditions in the speech act. According to Searle, felicity conditions function as the constitutive rules for the illocutionary act (Searle, 1969). The rules thus create the activity itself. In a more general sense, Searle contrasts *constitutive rules* – which can create or define new forms of behavior – with *regulative rules*, which perform as the name suggests (Searle in Simson and Dejica-Cartis, 2015: 235).

In this light, Searle's contributions to speech act theory should be interpreted as more than a mere extension to Austin's work (Sbisà, 2007). Rather, it is a revision that gives primacy to usage over meaning (Ambroise, 2010: 4). As Searle himself states: "speaking a language is engaging in a rule-governed form of behavior" (Searle, 1969: 41). This view leads Searle to approach speech act theory more schematically and as a logical phenomenon as opposed to a social phenomenon (Pratt, 1986; Briggs, 1998; Leezenberg, 1999; Hepple, 2003; see also Searle and Vandervelken, 1985), even though his constitutive view of felicity conditions seems to ask for an analysis that includes social context and conventionalities. At this point in time, linguists depart more in the direction of logical positivism as opposed to ordinary language philosophy. Yet at the same time, other authors in fields such as sociology (Habermas, 1984; Bordieu, 1982), literary studies (Rosaldo, 1982; Pratt, 1986), political theory (specifically gender theory and queer theory, see Butler, 1993), and political science (Buzan et al, 1998) take an interest in speech act theory in the more socially-embedded sense that the theoretical foundations ask for.

For Bordieu (1982), it is exactly the social context or 'linguistic capital' that he uses to explain the varying success in perlocution of speech acts: "although it is legitimate to treat social relations – even relations of domination – as symbolic interactions [...] one must not forget that the relations of communication *par excellence* – linguistic exchanges – are also relations of symbolic power in which the power relations between speakers of their respective groups are actualized" (Bordieu quoted in Hepple, 2003: 4, emphasis in original). This emphasis on power relations allows Bordieu to analyze how asymmetrical patterns of power can explain discrepancies between illocutionary point and force. Key to his concept of symbolic power is that language establishes institutions that facilitate "felicitous behavior" (the illocutionary force) by apparent means of masking that force in a tactical and polite way (the illocutionary point), thereby obscuring the more contentious nature of power asymmetries (Leezenberg, 1999).

The individualistic and taxonomical foundations of speech act theory are problematized in Pratt (1986): "speaker and hearer are generally taken in speech-act theory to be strikingly monolithic entities" and "[s]peech-act theory, in its dominant versions, supposes the existence behind speech act of

an authentic, self-consistent, essential self” (Pratt, 1986: 62). She points out that this is problematic because it deprives utterances of their social context, thereby missing the ability to explain changes in use of language from context-to-context and from time-to-time (ibid: 63-64). Context is not a backdrop that can be ignored, but rather mutually constitutive together with subjects in how one speaks and why. In brief, the ideological content of speech acts should not be overlooked if the theory is going to hold any explanatory sway.

### *2.1.3. Speech act theory in political science*

Speech act theory entered into the realm of political science in the 1990s by the Copenhagen School as a means to explain why a phenomenon does or does not become a security problem (Balzacq, 2010). Until the 1990s, security studies were dominated by realist and neorealist theories that reduced security to the internal will of states to survive in an anarchic system, while defining security in strictly military and material matters (Wæver, 1996: 163; van Apeldoorn, 2004: 147). In light of the third *Great Debate* in international relations (Smith, 2007), founders of the Copenhagen School criticized this image by using speech act theory to argue that security matters also extend beyond an objectified and material world (Wæver, 1995: 55). In his article, Wæver uses the Austenian notion of “saying it to make it so”. Agents seek to strategically mobilize semiotic changes through speech acts because the new meaning can be used to their advantage. Success of the speech act depends on the audience’s willingness to accept the semiotic change, thereby making it an intersubjective and shared understanding of the world (Buzan et al, 1998). Importantly, this process is defined as a discursive practice that exists within the speech act (ibid.).

In political science, the understanding of speech act theory remains quite close to the linguistic model of speech act theory that favors use over understanding. According to Buzan et al (1998: 32-33), there exists an internal condition to speech acts that closely resembles the locutionary act, thus consisting of linguistic properties, and an external dimension that speaks to the social context, accepted procedures and conventions for such an act to be performed in. Language is seen as the vehicle through which meaning and intentions are communicated (ibid; Stritzel, 2007), closely approximating Austin’s and especially Searle’s theorization on speech acts. Fundamentally, the emphasis on discourse arguably provides a theoretical mismatch with the perlocutionary aspect of speech acts. If discourses are self-referential, like Copenhagen School authors claim, a mere utterance can constitute a new social reality. As such, the need to study conditions under which hearers accept the act vanishes (Balzacq, 2005: 177). This mirrors the criticism that has been leveraged at linguists and their disregard of the social world in speech act theory. When such a critical part of the theory is based upon the audience’s acceptance of the newly framed reality, one would expect a more comprehensive account for how and why audiences react to speech acts. As Judith Butler (1988: 525) argues: “the relation between acts

and conditions is neither unilateral nor unmediated. There are social contexts and conventions within which certain acts not only become possible but become conceivable as acts at all. The transformation of social relations becomes a matter then of transforming hegemonic social conditions rather than the individual acts that are spawned by those conditions.”. In brief, a historical and contextual element is missing from speech act theory.

Several authors within the security literature have articulated similar criticisms of the Copenhagen School’s handling of speech act theory (e.g., Bigo, 2002; Stritzel, 2007: 358; McDonald, 2008; Vuori, 2008). The most comprehensive critique is developed by Thierry Balzacq (2005; 2010). Balzacq offers two important criticisms. First, he argues that beyond the lack of contextual awareness, the linguistic approach is overly rigid and mechanic, reducing speech acts to a process with a set of felicity conditions that must be followed in order to achieve success (2005: 189). This, as Balzacq argues, is a “theoretically restrictive position”, for it overlooks the perlocutionary aspect of speech act theory. Additionally, procedures may vary over time and space, and some procedures might not have been invented yet (see also Hepple, 2003). Moreover, the ‘sincerity’ condition is often violated in the discursive process, with agents being strategically rather than genuinely motivated towards their illocutionary point. This is also problematic for Gricke’s cooperative principle that underpins speech act theory (i.e., the goal is not to rationally and faithfully come to a shared understanding). As a consequence, both the power-relations that bring about the discursive transformation and its mutually constitutive context are exempted from analysis (Balzacq, 2005: 191).

Finally, there is the question of who has ‘linguistic competence’: “In the political field, as in many others, the ability of bringing about transformations with words largely depends on the authority that actually articulates sequences of utterances [...] who is allowed to speak about a subject matter or who can partake in the debate” (ibid: 191). This overcomes many of the critiques leveraged against speech act theory. Specifically, linguistic competence should be broken down into agency and structure. The agent who performs a speech act holds a certain degree of power that pits it at an advantage or disadvantage in articulating the act (Fearon, 1999). The hearer’s reaction to the speech act is also guided by (the degree of) power asymmetries (Bordieu, 1982). At the same time, structures will constrain and enable specific types of felicitous behavior (cf. Foucault, 1981). Unfortunately, the exact ontological status of a speech act in relation to its broader social context remains undefined by speech act authors. This ultimately leads Balzacq to depart from speech acts entirely. However, instead of throwing out the baby with the bathwater, I suggest to amend the theory for explaining political phenomena in the next section.

In conclusion, this rather eclectic discussion has shown that speech act theory has become commonplace in many fields beyond philosophy and linguistics. Most notably for this thesis, the theory

has already been used to mixed success in the field of political science. The main lesson that can be drawn from these debates is that speech act theory in its current form insufficiently examines the contextual elements and strategic possibilities of language. In the next section, I propose a reconceptualized speech act theory that is sensitive to power asymmetries and social contexts.

## *2.2. The semiotical turn: turning speech act theory on its head*

This section builds on the previous insights where we have seen that in order to adapt linguistic speech acts to political speech acts, an explicit contextual element as well as a vision on power relations must be included. Further theoretical challenges lie in transposing micro-level mechanisms (i.e., how an individual agent uses language) to macro-level social phenomena. The macro-level social world contains a plethora of additional contingencies that influence the way speech acts ultimately affect their target-audience. A speech act by an institution such as the European Commission would not entail a “simple, straightforward diatribe between actor and audience” (Mak, 2006: 68), but rather a spectrum of actors that affect the social environment in which the speech act is produced and reproduced. Therefore, the implications in going from micro to macro must be explored. In order to perform such theorization, it is important to succinctly address the ontology behind speech act theory.

In the introduction, it was stressed that any inquiry should commence with ontology. Problematic for that assertion is that speech act authors never explicitly spell out what the ontological underpinnings of their theory are. Therefore, the debates behind and critiques against the theory were a necessary preliminary step before discussing ontology proper. Ontology is the branch of metaphysics where we inquire into the nature and structure of social reality, asking the fundamental question of what is real (Noonan, 2008: 577-578). Questions such as “is there a reality beyond our own observation” and “can this reality change over time” are important because they are precursors to the theoretical, epistemological, and methodological considerations that researchers face (Wight, 2006). Within ontological debates, nominalism<sup>6</sup> is juxtaposed against realism. Nominalists see the world as a social construct from the ground up, with interpretations always contingent upon (idiosyncratic) individual or collective beliefs. Intersubjective ‘webs’ of meanings can arise, but these only hold explanatory sway within the group that it emanated from (Geertz, 1973: 5). Contrary to nominalists, ontological realists assume that reality is preordained and fixed, meaning that something transcending our individual observations is ‘out there’. An ontological framework should be located somewhere in the continuum between nominalism and realism, since staunch adherence to one end point leads to either (epistemic) relativism or reductionism respectively (see below).

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<sup>6</sup>Different terms exist for the same concepts. Beyond nominalism and realism, one can also speak of (anti-) foundationalism or relativism. However, to avoid confusion, only the nominalism-realism dichotomy is used.

Fundamentally, speech act theory in its linguistic form treads much closer to nominalism than realism. It confers a special ontological status to speech acts but remains only implicit about both the existence of a system or structure of extra-linguistic symbols, how this system could enable or constrain illocutionary motivations and perlocutionary success, and how speech acts could possibly re-shape the system. Both Austin and Searle emphasize the rule-bound nature of speech acts. However, as Pratt notes: “speech-act philosophers tend to be very skeptical [...] about the theory’s potential for characterizing language as a political practice. While often acknowledging the theory’s dependence on undeveloped assumptions about social interaction, they argue that it is impossible to develop these assumptions in any satisfactory way.” (Pratt, 1982: 60). This is not to say that such assumptions are eschewed from entirely: “we have [...] the case of procedures which someone is initiating. Sometimes he may ‘get away with it’ like, in football, the man who first picked up the ball and ran.” (HTW: 30). While Austin’s acknowledgement opens up the door to a less restrictive and crude juxtaposition of agency and structure because agents can also change the structures that their behavior is constrained and enabled by, this only raises further questions as to why speech act theorists do not rigorously theorize on structures and give primacy to agency.

The remarkable disinterest in structures and social contexts does not bode well for the possibility to mobilize speech act theory towards the explanandum. By giving exclusive attention to agency, the capacity to explain *why* certain courses of actions are taken is lost, since we need power relations or *linguistic capital* in the sense of Bordieu to do so, and these inherently refer to a context outside the speech act and with it, outside of agency. As agency precipitates or even displaces structures entirely, speech act theory becomes relativist towards explaining social phenomena. By only conferring meaning to linguistic symbols, ‘why’ questions can never be fully answered, since all extra-linguistic symbols – including structures – are declared meaningless. Consequently, although Austin has made speech act theory performative, it still cannot explain why a discrepancy exists between the pairing of an infinite number of conceivable connotations with only a finite number of denotations, nor why spatio-temporal fluctuations exist over what can be said where and when. Thus speech act theory’s relativism ironically also leads to reductionism – in a linguistic form. In defense of speech act theory, that might not be a problem for pragmatists in linguistics, since their goal is to study language in use. However, authors in the social sciences should critically re-evaluate the implications of speech act theory towards explaining social phenomena.

Beyond production and reproduction of social reality, the micro-level nature of speech acts should be critically explored. Within the ontology of speech act theory, speech acts are seen as singular phrases spoken from one speaker to one hearer (Pratt, 1986). This is rather problematic. In a political context, institutions can wield agential powers because they have the possibility to produce speech acts,

and their speech acts may conceivably be addressed to an entire constellation of actors rather than a single interlocutor. Furthermore, speech acts may exist as macro-level accumulations of micro-level acts in the form of entire texts (Bazerman, 1994). As such, it becomes difficult to delineate the nature of the speaker and the properties of the locutionary act without further theorization.

When expanding agency to institutions and speech acts towards entire texts, we are moving away from the micro-level origins of speech act theory. In spelling out what the characteristics of a macro-level speech act might be, van Dijk (1992; 2015) proposes the following definition: “the global speech act [is] performed by the utterance of a whole discourse, and executed by a sequence of possibly different speech acts” (van Dijk, 1992: 215). Van Dijk argues that when faced with complex and sequential arrays of information, such as an extensive policy document, we will cognitively accumulate this information and transform it into an overall impression (ibid: 217-219). In similar vein, Bazerman argues that “if the text is distinctly identifiable as of a single genre, it can gain a unified force, for it is now labeled as of a single kind instantiating a recognizable social action” (Bazerman, 1994: 75). If the sum or sequence (cf. Van Dijk, 1992) of speech acts within a document give rise to an overall cohesive message, it can be considered a macro-level speech act (see also Simson and Dejima-Cartis, 2014). As such, speech acts are essentially tools for meaning-making.

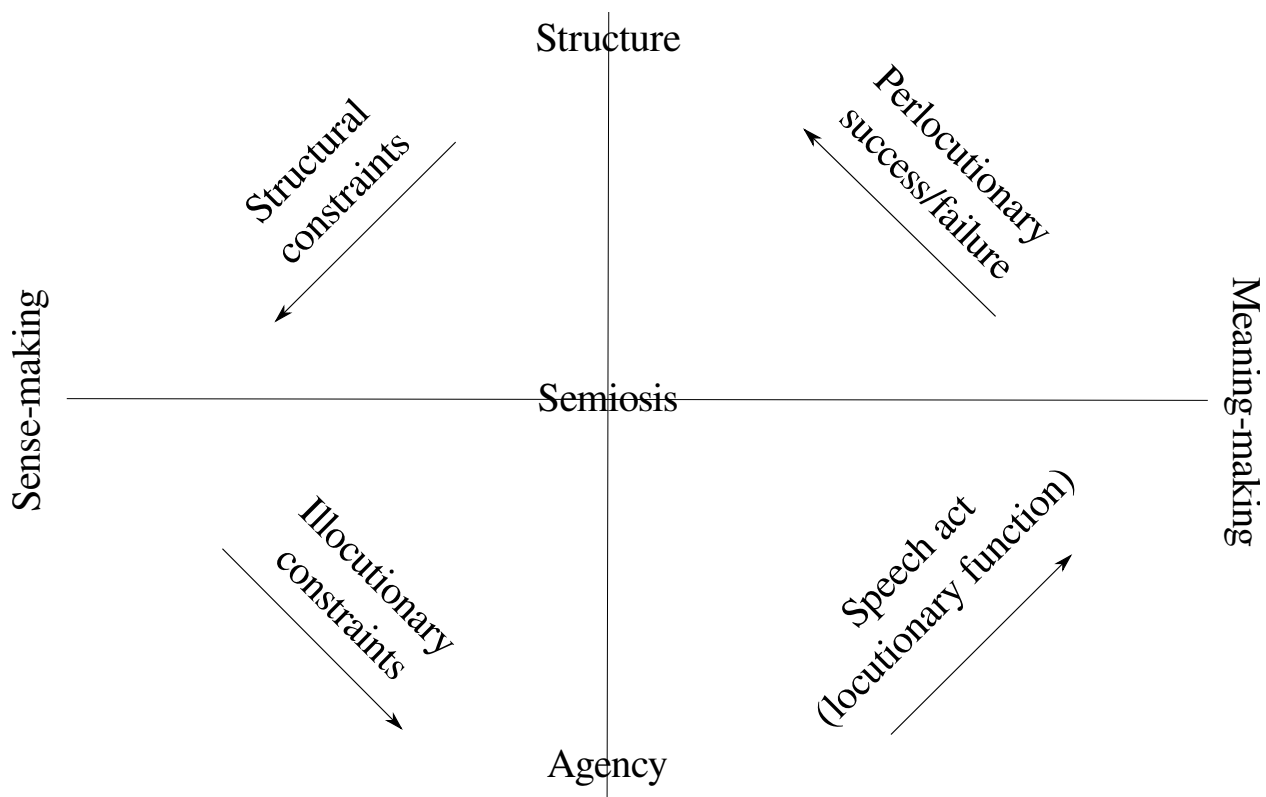
This final observation of meaning-making provides an important avenue to overcome the shortcomings of nominalism. In fact, we may argue that it turns speech act theory on its head in the Marxian sense: it is not some abstract set of ideas that speech acts realize into a concrete world, but rather a material world that structures and realizes concrete thought through speech acts (without being deterministic). In light of this observation, a more useful way of theorizing speech acts is provided by Flores Farfan and Holzscheiter (2010: 141):

“Discourse [is] an interface that allows us to understand the emergence and effects of power relations through a complex co-constitutive relationship between agents and structures. Discourse, is, on the one hand, seen as the most important location for the production of asymmetric relationships of power and, on the other hand, seen as the place where individuals are in a position to renegotiate or even level out relationships of power. Discourses in themselves act as powerful structures of social conventions (meaning-conventions) by limiting the potentially indefinite ways of thinking about and perceiving social and material reality. Yet, it is also linguistic interaction which is seen as constantly transforming and challenging dominant perceptions of this social and material reality. Every speech-act, thus, at the same time represents and transforms patterns of meaning.”

Several highly useful elements emanate from this quote. First, it explicitly acknowledges the existence

and irreducible ontological status of agents and structures, preventing relativism and reductionism simultaneously. Second, the authors theorize on what one could call *semiosis*: the complexity-reducing sense- and meaning-making processes that agents must engage in prior to entering social relations (Fairclough et al, 2001). At any given time, agents enter a world that is pre-structured and filled with patterns of meaning produced by previous social interactions (Sum & Jessop, 2013: 3-4). As such, the number of options and their expediency is contingent upon time and space. In other words: the semiotic playing field is not level. However, agents hold the potential to transform patterns of meaning through producing speech acts of their own. In this sense, speech acts are part of the process of semiosis, which can be seen as the transmissive belt between agency and structure. It gives form to meaning-making and with it, processes of social change. At the same time, structures (linguistic and extra-linguistic) always constrain and enable certain patterns of sense-making (i.e., the semiotic options at agents' disposal at a given time). Figure 2 summarizes the preceding discussion, combined

**Figure 2:** Speech act theory redefined



with a practical application of speech act theory into the new framework of semiosis. It shows the cycle of social change through structures influencing the formation of speech acts (sense-making), and how agents produce speech acts that can subsequently succeed or fail to alter the structure informing the formation of new speech acts (meaning-making).

Recalibrating speech act theory from a nominalist to a realist perspective opens avenues into a more dynamic and apt theorization of social change. However, one can critically ask if the ontological turn towards semiosis is sufficient. In explaining social phenomena, speech act theory refers to contexts and conventions. It is sensitive to the possibility that different contexts exist and therefore yield different outcomes, but it does not provide a fundamental logic that transcends one single (structural) context. As such, the fact that agent-bound denotations of speech acts are informed by specific motivations is taken as a given, while the differing enabling and constraining effects of structure-bound connotations is not explored. At this point, it all breaks down, and speech act theory remains an – albeit refined – mechanical theory. Unfortunately, if the goal is to explain social phenomena, we must also know what these motivations and structurations are, for not knowing them leads to an infinite regression of our theory making reference to social conventions structuring behavior, which in turn were the result of earlier agency-structure interactions. Therefore, another theory that can the void of this mechanic is necessary. As John Searle (1969: 17) himself has argued: “A theory of language is part of a theory of action”.

Ultimately then, even in amended form, speech act theory only manages to produce a more sophisticated ‘how’ part of the explanans; the all-important ‘why’ question remains unexplored. We can salvage speech act theory by redefining it as an ontologically realist perspective, wherein speech acts are part of the processes of semiosis that transmit agency and structures. However, in line with Searle’s argumentation, this necessitates us to seek recourse to a theory of action that rhymes with the agency-structure dialectic mediated by semiosis.

### 2.3. *A critical theory of action*

In the quest to find a theory of action appropriate for both combination with speech act theory and explaining the proliferation of policy coherence, this thesis argues that the best option is to make use of a critical political economy perspective. This section discusses critical realism as an ontology of action that can subsequently be filled in by several theoretical perspectives. In particular, the thesis draws from the concept of historical materialism, the *régulation* approach, neo-Gramscian scholarship, and cultural political economy.

#### 2.3.1. *Critical realist ontology*

The previous section’s ontological framework should now be developed further. A prime candidate for this is an approach known as critical realism (Bhaskar 1979; Sayer, 2000). Contrary to positivist ontological perspectives, critical realism does not reduce reality to empirically observable regularities. Rather, it departs from the distinction between the *intransitive* and *transitive* (Sayer, 2000). The former is the object of science; the social phenomena that we are interested in. The transitive

dimension on the other hand houses theories, observations, and experiences about the social world. Crucially, critical realism holds that the two dimensions are separate, meaning that a new theory in the transitive dimension does not necessarily correlate to a change in the intransitive dimension. In other words: we should not conflate experience with understanding how the social world works. Doing so produces a static image that reduces agents to atomistic units recursively exhibiting structurally determined and seemingly predictable patterns that – in reality – only reflect the transitive dimension (Bhaskar, 1979). This is especially salient when one considers that knowledge and experience are theory-laden, subject to power-relations, and therefore not neutral (see [Section 2.3.5](#)).

Having established that the world is not equivalent to our experience of it, the next step is to see how we might envision the relation between experience and reality. To this end, critical realists posit the existence of a stratified reality wherein they identify three spheres: the real, the actual, and the empirical (Bhaskar, 1975; Clark, 2008: 167). The *real* entails all that exists regardless of its empirical observability or our understanding of it. It is also the level of structures (material and ideational), objects, and powers that act as *generative mechanisms* for social phenomena (Sayer, 2000: 11; Bhaskar, 1975). Importantly, critical realists contend that these generative mechanisms do not always produce the same outcomes and are changeable over time, and may not have even been revealed yet. Therefore, how they act upon the world at particular spatio-temporal injunctions is part of the *actual*, the next layer of critical realism's ontology. As an example, in this theoretical framework the semiotic cycle and concurrent linguistic and extra-linguistic structures are generative mechanisms of the real, while speech acts are a means to actualize these structures since they are real-world events. However, even these events in the actual do not equate to experiences, because speech acts and semiosis are a theory-laden interpretations of reality, and other interpretations remain possible. As such, it is necessary to distinguish one final level, the level of the *empirical*. This is the realm of human observation and experience, which, as discussed above, is fallible and permanently embedded in social structures (Clark, 2008: 167).

Because of the distinction between the transitive and intransitive and the threefold stratification of reality, critical realists avoid the three most important fallacies that any ontological framework can exhibit. First, because a separation between objects and knowledge of them exists, critical realism steers clear of the nominalist/relativist/voluntarist fallacy that approaches such as (linguistic) speech act theory or constructivism within the social sciences are trapped in. At the same time, critical realists avoid reductionist/empiricist/functionalist fallacies that entrap positivist perspectives since the stratified ontology tasks scientists to look further than fixed definitions and known features solely based on sensory observation (Yalvaç, 2010: 172). Finally, critical realism provides space for both agents and structures and for the material and ideational dimensions of reality. Although agents inherently

enter a pre-structured world, this world is open-ended because its generative mechanisms and our understanding of them can change over time. Consequently, history itself also becomes a key object of study for critical realists (Bhaskar, 1998: 218-219). By this, we go beyond descriptive fallacies abound in a-historical perspectives.

Because critical realists assume the existence of a world beyond our knowledge and see agents as fallible and unable to capture all of these contingencies, critical realism is a natural ally to the notion of semiosis as a mechanism of sense- and meaning making (Sum & Jessop, 2013: 10). As Fairclough et al (2001: 22) note: “[s]emiosis has its own distinctive elements, necessary properties, and emergent effects and, even though (and precisely because) these qualities and their associated causal powers and liabilities interpenetrate, interfere with, and overdetermine other types of social relations and institutional orders, they must be integrated into a more comprehensive critical realist analysis of the social world. In this way we can move to provide explanations that are ‘socially (or semiotically) adequate’ as well as ‘objectively probable’ in the sense that they establish the discursive as well as extra-discursive conditions of existence of the explicandum”. Semiosis thus captures the structurally embedded process of how we select elements that are meaningful to us, and how we transpose those selections to produce or reproduce structures. In sum, critical realism is consonant with and expands upon the ontological framework of structures – semiosis – agency, while also adding history as an object of explanation. In the remainder of section 2.3, the critical political economy framework will be molded onto the three layers of the critical realist ontology.

### 2.3.2. *The “real”: historical materialism, class struggle, and crises*

For any critical political economy perspective, the “real” is based on the Marxian notion of historical materialism<sup>7</sup> As a logic of action, historical materialism encapsulates key generative dialectical agency-structure and ideal-material processes. It holds that humans must engage in productive relationships if they are to survive (van der Pijl, 2009: 223). Because contemporary forms of production are diversified, interrelated, and increasingly transnational, they fundamentally require agents to enter into social relations to further production (ibid.). Production is understood as “the production and reproduction of knowledge, institutions and the social relations involved in the production of physical goods.” (Cox, 1989: 39). Therefore, it would be false to equate materialism to purely physical objects, or to reduce it to mere economism (Bieler & Morton, 2004; Brown, 2015). Rather, the totality of productive relationships is what makes up the materialism in historical materialism.

If the social relations of production bring in the materialism, it is the *modes of regulation* in which

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<sup>7</sup>It should be noted that while Marx’s writings form the theoretical and emancipatory basis of critical theory, modern-day scholars leave aside Marx’s more reductionist and determinist assumptions, as outlined in the following sections.

they are organized that bring in the history. Modes of regulation roughly equate to structures, and include the institutional, physical, and discursive arrangements necessary to reproduce a specific *accumulation regime* (e.g., the legal, military, and agrarian customs to further Feudalism in Medieval Europe) (Boyer & Saillard, 2002). As societies always contain groups or classes with conflicting interests (e.g., Bourgeoisie and workers), class struggle naturally occurs in any accumulation regime. Marx took from Hegel the essential idea that every subsequent modality of human history contains its own negation; a dialectic resulting in crisis and subsequently a new synthesis where these contradictions are *sublated* ('aufgehoben') (Maybee, 2016). However, Marx roots social change in the material instead of the ideational. At its material base, capitalism is growth-oriented and always looking for ways to accumulate more capital (Boyer & Saillard, 2002; Jessop & Sum, 2006). This can be done through reinvesting surplus capital to establish positive feedback loops of accumulation (Harvey, 1989). However, such strategies can never be sustained on the longer term, leading to moments of overaccumulation: a situation where there are no ways to unite idle surplus capital and productive capacity (Harvey, 2006). When left unresolved, these moments lead to crises that are (to varying rates) detrimental to capitalism itself (ibid.). To prevent this from occurring, capitalism induces systematic incentives for agents close to the means of production to “spread” capitalism with the help of the legal and institutional framework of the state. Spreading capitalism can occur through either geographical expansion and a ‘deepening’ of capitalism, i.e., by bringing market principles to new circuits of social life (ibid.).

Further generative mechanisms emanate from the stratification of society into base- and superstructure. The base-structure of society entails the means and relations of production – the accumulation regime – while the superstructure contains all elements not directly related to production, including (but not limited to) art, culture, law, and philosophy – the mode of regulation<sup>8</sup>. For now, all that matters is that there is more than a material base in the theory; the implications of this only become relevant in the actual and the empirical. Understanding Marxian dialectics can identify the position of social forces within society while also exposing underlying power relations (Cox, 1983). Moreover, it offers a heuristic for a more sophisticated and multi-layered analysis of power relations that observes all relevant social forces, for instance including NGOs and regional organizations such as the EU. For these reasons, in a contemporary historical materialist analysis we must analyze the forms of social power “through which conditions of capitalism are reproduced, mediated and contested” (Bieler & Morton, 2004: 2).

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<sup>8</sup>Importantly, the base-superstructure binary as found in orthodox Marxism does not translate one-on-one with the conception of this thesis. Here, the dichotomy of accumulation regimes and modes of regulation provides far more space for ideas and norms than the former (see also Jessop & Sum, 2006: 173).

Although historical materialism is treated by critical scholars as a law of development for human history, it does not equate to historicism. On the contrary, a fundamental aspect of contemporary critical scholarship is the notion of open-endedness and an unpredictability of future relationships (Kannankulam & Georgi, 2014). In conclusion, historical materialism allows us to examine social relations as historically-situated, to look at not just the horizontal (i.e., inter-state) but also the vertical dimension of power struggles, to bring in non-state actors, and finally, to examine how power relationships in the productive process constitute social reality, and vice-versa.

### 2.3.3. *The “actual”: ideology and strategic selectives*

How do the generative mechanism of historical materialism translate into the social world? In uncovering this, the aim of this section is twofold. First, to see what the most important mechanisms are, and second, to see when these mechanisms are (not) activated and why. In the preceding section, it was stressed that a capitalist society is constituted by both a material (productive) base, and an ideational sphere. Within orthodox Marxism, however, the ideational amounts to little else than an expression of material forces of production (Iretzberger, 2017: 120-121). It was not until the 1920s and 30s when a more sophisticated conceptualization of the ideational sphere arose. In particular, Antonio Gramsci has successfully argued for a greater role for ideas and how they translate into *ideology*, and how the role of civil society in this process is indispensable (Cox & Sinclair, 1996; van Apeldoorn, 2004). Gramsci criticized Marxists of his time for their functionalist understanding of social forces coupled with an almost exclusive focus on the material (Sum & Jessop, 2013: 72-76; Rosengarten, 2018). In present-day terms, Gramsci advocated for and provided a fully-fledged theorization on the dialectical relationship between agency-structure and the ideal-material.

According to Gramsci, the class struggles arising out of the inherent contradictions in an accumulation regime ultimately lead to class consciousness of oppressed social forces. As a counter-mechanism, mere dominance through coercive means in the base structure of society is not enough. Rather, *hegemony* at the level of discourse in the form of political, intellectual, and moral leadership that unites base- and superstructure is necessary. This leads to a situation of tacit consent where the material reality of exploitative productive relations is suppressed, although still protected by an ‘armor of coercion’ as a last resort (Hall, 1986: 20). Hegemonic discourses “unify the ruling class and attract mass support and can become hegemonic in so far as they combine mutually compatible blueprints for handling relations among various fractions of capital and for conducting labor relations” (Sum & Jessop, 2013: 85). Hereby, Gramsci brings in both agency and the ideational. Importantly, Gramsci does not fall for the relativist fallacy because he does retain an important role for the material. For him, hegemony is rooted in a ‘decisive economic nucleus’ (ibid: 77; 262), where only agents close to the means of production can attain hegemony (Augelli & Murphy, 1993: 130).

Relevant to the explanandum, Gramsci has inspired two important branches of critical scholarship: neo-Gramscianism (see especially Cox, 1981; 1983; 1987; Gill, 1991; Rupert, 1995; Robinson, 2004) and the strongly related transnational historical materialism movement (van der Pijl, 1984; Van Apeldoorn, 2004; Overbeek, 2005). In the 1980s, a series of critical essays authored by Robert Cox brought Gramsci to the field of international relations and the newly established field of international political economy. Cox expressed dissatisfaction with the ahistorical, solely material, and problem-solving nature of international relations scholarship of the time (Cox, 1981; 1987). He considered structural factors such as state's material capabilities as being overly dominant (e.g., Waltz, 1979; Keohane, 1984). According to him, the field should be opened up to approaches that draw from history as a tool of explanation and provide equal importance to the material and the ideational. To this end, he devised a more sophisticated approach to structures by delineating the material, ideational, and institutional factors within them (Cox, 1987; Cox & Sinclair, 1996). Moreover, agency was brought in by adopting a proto-critical realist ontology that regards social reality as something of causal power but also of changeable nature (Sum & Jessop, 2013: 74).

Partially in concurrence with Cox, work within the newly established critical paradigm of critical political economy was taken up by the so-called Amsterdam School of transnational historical materialism (e.g., Van Apeldoorn, 2004; see also Sum & Jessop, 2013: 84-86). Although one can critically ask to what extent the Amsterdam School is a 'school'<sup>9</sup>, a concept relevant to this thesis that Amsterdam authors provide is a commitment to transnationalism, hence the name transnational historical materialism. Van Apeldoorn (2002; 2004: 161) conceptualizes the transnational not as a separate sphere that one can demarcate in similar fashion as domestic vis-à-vis international, but rather as social relations that stretch across and beyond borders. Importantly, the last decades have seen a transnationalization of class struggles, rendering analyses at the level of the nation-state increasingly insufficient (Van Apeldoorn, 2004; Robinson, 2004). A horizontal element of complexity arises because capitalist class formation at the transnational level is not monolithic, as fractures and struggles among them possible (Van Apeldoorn, 2004). At the same time, subaltern social forces have to face the reality that their struggles are increasingly decentralized and delineated from conventional political bodies, providing both new challenges and new entry-points (Bieler & Morton, 2003).

By exploring the 'actual', we have so far established that the ideational matters greatly in how the generative mechanisms of historical materialism become activated upon the world. However, the institutional and discursive mechanisms that further constitute the actual should also be explored. This is especially important because of three flaws in Neo-Gramscian scholarship. First, Cox's conception

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<sup>9</sup>For instance, Van Apeldoorn (2004) essentially takes a Neo-Gramscian approach, while Overbeek (2004) in the same issue draws from debates within regulation theory, and even from sociologists such as Giddens (1979).

of institutions is seriously flawed, as he regards them simply as part of structures. This provides a distorted and stale image, because agents themselves influence how institutions function and transform over time (Jessop, 1999). Moreover, institutions are not monolithic, and conflictuous relations can arise both within and between them (Poulantzas, 1978). Second, rather than regarding the trilectic of ideas, material capabilities and institutions as co-constitutive, Neo-Gramscian scholarship usually treats them more as juxtaposed and idealtypical dimensions, thereby obscuring the fundamental semiotic processes through which social forces produce and reproduce hegemony (Germain & Kenny, 1998; Sum & Jessop, 2013: 79).

The third flaw in Neo-Gramscian scholarship is an empirical one. In recent years, capitalism has increasingly taken an authoritarian turn by moving away from Gramscian persuasion and towards marginalization and outright exclusion of dissenting social forces by deploying legal and institutional mechanisms of the state (Bruff, 2014: 116; see also Dauvergne & LeBaron, 2014; Tansel, 2017). After the global financial crisis, capitalism faced a crucial contradictory injunction: on the one hand, the state's ability to collect the taxes necessary to sustain the programs to stabilize capitalism's pernicious effects has waned as a result of the circumventing powers of transnational capital (Streeck, 2016: 113-127). On the other hand, the necessity to further spread and expand the processes that have produced these tendencies has only further increased because of capitalism's expansionary nature. As a result, we increasingly see legal and constitutional encroachments against the counter-narratives provided by dissenting social forces such as organized labor and activists (Bruff, 2014).

In light of this, a better way to understand the variation, selection, and retention of ideas and potential success of agency is to understand them through the concept of *strategic selectivity*. Drawing from Poulantzas (1978: 130), Jessop (1990) argues that institutions are always the *material condensations* of previous social struggles, instigating proclivities and path-dependencies towards favoring interests aligned with these previous struggle's victors (see also Kannankulam, 2008: 68-77). Hereby, the Coxian narrative is turned upside down because institutions are no longer mere tools to reproduce hegemony. Instead, they are spaces where (sometimes conflictual) configurations of power are channeled through (albeit selectively), and this is what produces and reproduces hegemony. Beyond these *institutional selectives*, Sum and Jessop (2013) importantly introduce *discursive selectivity*. Guided by the material generative mechanisms and their ideological outworkings, an enforced set of possibilities in terms of what meanings can or cannot be selected, as well as their ordering and importance, will always arise (ibid: 214-215). As such, how we make sense of the world in terms of the ideas we deem meaningful is contingent upon time and space, guided by whatever hegemonic discourse currently exists. Therefore, discursive selectivity greatly affects the process of semiosis by imposing a certain preordainedness to how agents go from sense- to meaning-making.

#### 2.3.4. The “empirical”: interpretation, co-optation, and (subaltern) consciousness

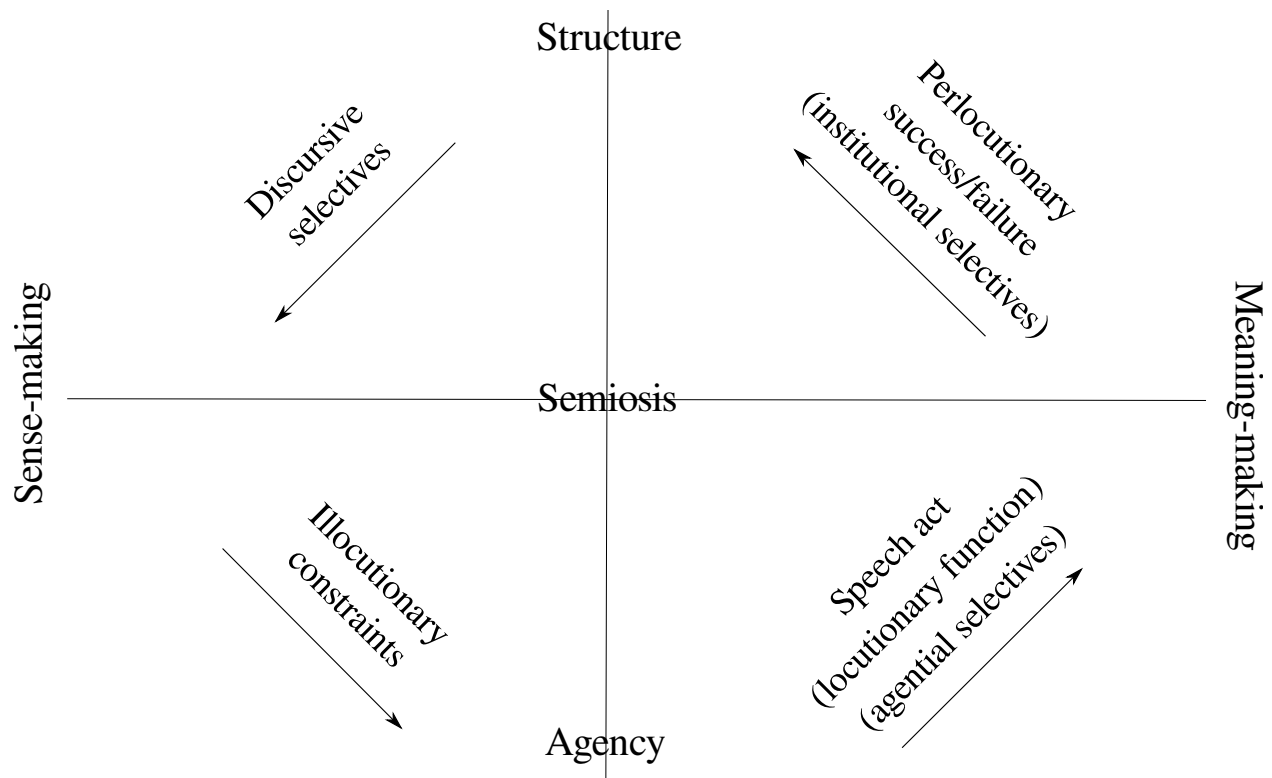
No matter how preordained the social order is, agents themselves still have a role to play because they cannot be reduced to the material, institutional, and discursive structures that they are embedded in. On the level of the empirical, the question therefore becomes what agents *do*; how they act upon the realities that they face, and what role does semiosis play in this regard? In light of this, the task of the final level of analysis is to explore agency for both capitalist and subaltern social forces.

The mechanisms and on-goings in the real and the actual always constrain and enable certain courses of action. This applies to both capitalist and subaltern social forces. For instance, the threat of overaccumulation incentivizes capitalist agents to seek for new ways to spread capitalism (Harvey, 1989: 180; Keucheyan, 2013: 105). This process further attunes social life towards capitalism and as such, capitalist agents are embedded in a system that subsists by the virtue of creating its own necessity. Capitalism is spread, however, by finding a way that reconciles material necessities with a (sometimes embattled) ideational push over the meaning of the mode of regulation. One such tactic that helps in this regard is co-optation. When hegemony of the dominant discourse is threatened by a (potentially) counter-hegemonic discourse, elites can seek recourse to co-optation of either persons or ideas dangerous to the discourse, thereby thwarting resistance and retaining consent (Cox & Sinclair, 1996: 130; 138).

These clashing interests bring us to the subaltern agential perspective. Within the limits imposed by the real and actual, subaltern agents can seek to use semiosis to their advantage. By making strategic use of timing and framing, agents can point out contradictions and conflicting realities between hegemonic discourses and material reality (Sum & Jessop, 2013: 217). Relevant here at the level of the empirical is the final type of strategic selectives: *agential selectives*. Agential selectivity refers to “the differential capacity of agents to engage in structurally oriented strategic calculation” (ibid: 217-218). Certain agents will, either due to their proximity to the means of production or through their ability to create or captivate specific (counter) hegemonic narratives, have varying rates of success in reading, persuading, and changing meanings at particular injunctions (ibid.). Therefore, agential selectivity contributes in understanding why certain denotation-connotation pairings can be felicitous (to use a speech act term) or not.

Bringing together the various points of discussion so far, Figure 3 updates the amended speech act model. Most importantly, the three selectives have entered into the fray at their specific injunctions. Agential selectives play a role in transmitting the meaning of speech acts to perlocutionary success or failure. Agents closer to the center of productive and/or ideational power are more likely to be ‘heard’. However, agents who know how to captivate sentiments of (potential) counter-hegemony can also make themselves heard, thereby changing the structure. Similar to what Butler (1988) and

**Figure 3:** Speech act theory and critical theory united



Searle (1999: 40) have suggested, change through speech acts might be ‘performative’, requiring repetition over time to truly attain hegemonic status. The perlocutionary phase has been updated with the institutional selectives. While related to agential selectives, institutions provide several procedural characteristics (e.g., rules that enable or constrain lobbying) that render them distinct from the former. Next, ‘structural constraints’ have been reconceptualized as discursive selectives. These selectives reduce cognitive dissonance by ordering and limiting the options for agents in their sense-making of the world, thereby also influencing the subsequent steps of meaning-making. All together, these four phases of sense- and meaning making constitute the processes of change in a specific mode of production. The more abstract concepts of critical scholarship, such as hegemony or crises in accumulation make their entry into the model though the various selectives. For instance, the material reality of a financial crisis may open up agential selectivity to critical voices because the predominant ideas about the existing have lost credibility.

In conclusion, though the preceding discussion might provide a fatalistic outlook for the role of agency, the opposite is true, for both capitalist classes and for subaltern agents have access to crucial entry-points to the actual and the real. Important in this regard is semiosis, and its relation to extra-semiotic realities. A special ontological status for this process is warranted due to its inherent role in structuring thoughts and behavior of every single agent (Sum & Jessop, 2013: 397). At the same

time, semiosis should not be reduced to either an idiosyncratic feature of agency, nor as a process that is solely structurally determined (ibid: 148-151). Rather, it is the transmissive belt that translates agential behavior into structural constraints and vice versa.

#### *2.3.5. Against determinism: locating the 'critical' in critical political economy*

Although the previous section completes the substantive part of the theory, an important final consideration lies in exploring what brings the 'critical' into the critical political economy perspective. Section 2.3 has stressed the non-neutrality of knowledge. This holds true for all forms of knowledge, but scientists – whose knowledge holds an authoritative position – should be especially aware and critical of this fact. But what does it mean to be a critical social scientist? To a certain degree, all (social) scientists should be critical towards the world and skeptical of theirs and other's findings. However, this arguably does not make one a proponent of critical theory, but rather it belongs to the core of scholarly diligence (Wigger & Horn, 2016: 39-40; Sayer, 2009). As such, the prefix 'critical' has become a source of considerable confusion in the social sciences (Wigger, 2016: 131-133).

To understand what critical scholarship entails, it becomes useful to briefly discuss social sciences theories from a meta-perspective. Fundamentally, a social sciences theory is a system of interrelated propositions that seek to explain social phenomena (Schutt, 2009: 38). Ontologically, this set of propositions can be dissected into three elements. First, a theory functions as a lens to descriptively capture and make sense of the contingencies and vast amounts of complexity in the social world, and to separate noise from signal. Second, a theory contains propositions with transcendental qualities that allow social scientists to make analytical inferences about observed social phenomena, usually with the goal to go beyond case-level understanding. In this way, theories in themselves are also tools for sense-making. Third, all theories contain implicit or explicit elements of reflection and normative assessments about the observed social phenomena (Horkheimer, 1972). As Bachelard (cited in Bhaskar, 1986: 7) argues, “[a]ll theory explicitly or tacitly, consciously or unconsciously, honestly or surreptitiously deposits, projects or presupposes a reality on account of which our concepts make some kind of sense on the world”.

Importantly, all theories contain elements of reflexivity because critical realism does not consider a rigorous object-subject separation to be possible (Wight, 2006). Consequently, a separation of facts and values is also unattainable (Bieler & Morton, 2004), making it crucial that researchers should understand their own position within the explanandum (Sayer, 2009). Researchers enter into a world that is filled with meanings (Sum & Jessop, 2013: 3), and what we experience is contingent upon time and space. Hereby, our position in the social world subsequently informs the descriptive and analytical aspects of theories, since we can never fully detach ourselves from our social ontologies. Thus, the reflexive element precipitates the other two elements. This means that – intentionally or

unintentionally – theories and research in general can change the meaning of the world that they are created in. As such, theories themselves actually become tools for meaning-making. As Robert Cox has famously argued: “theory is always for someone and for some purpose” (Cox, 1986: 207). This leaves us with two crucial questions: (1) what kind of meaning do we want to impose upon the world, and (2) within the limits of semiosis, how can one rupture the fabric of social reality and actually impose that meaning upon the world?

Targeting the first question, Wigger and Horn (2016) argue that a key part of critical theory’s normative axioms is its ontological emphasis on the negative. Indeed, by taking as default the position that the social world we live in is produced by asymmetrical constellations of power, we assume a critical attitude that in turn informs the descriptive and analytical turns we take as researchers (Kannankulam & Georgi, 2014). At the same time, the danger of leaving ontological assumptions unchallenged is that “[the] notion that knowledge can simply reflect the world leads to the uncritical identification of reality and rationality: One experiences the world as rational and necessary, thus deflating attempts to change it.” (Agger, 1991: 109). As an example, positivistic science contradicts itself insofar as it does not uphold its own normative assumption of value-neutrality to the same level of scrutiny that it brings to ideology, myth, and all forms of knowledge it deems non-scientific (Feyerabend, 1970). It thereby fails to realize that it enters the world as a value-laden set of sense-making ideas with connotations and the meaning-making effect those ideas hold upon becoming denotations. Therefore, critical theorists do not eschew from formulating emancipatory alternatives (Cox & Sinclair, 1996: 90; Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972; Shields et al, 2011: 172). In sum, what separates critical theory from ‘mainstream’ or ‘instrumental’ theory<sup>10</sup> is the acknowledgement of its social ontology combined with a commitment towards a more egalitarian and just social world.

Importantly, these ontological assumptions translate into a set of descriptive foci and analytical inferences that leave open the possibility for change (Clark, 2008: 168). As Marx has stated: “Men [sic] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.” (Marx, 1852/2008: II). Therefore, we should not seek to deductively fit our conjectures to the world and subsequently present them as (falsifiable) natural laws (Popper, 1963), but instead seek a historicized explanation that analyzes agency-structure dialectics as historically-situated social struggles that, in turn, could produce new outcomes. Consequently, the assumption that agents enter a pre-structured world does not lead to a deterministic view of social reality.

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<sup>10</sup>The separation between critical and mainstream or instrumental theories was introduced separately by the first-generation of Frankfurt School authors (see Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972; Marcuse, 1964) and within the Third debate in International relations (see Cox, 1986; Linklater, 1992).

But how do we change the world? Interestingly, although this is a rather obvious and essential question that any critical scholar should concern him/herself with, much of recent critical scholarship nevertheless falls short in providing concrete avenues for emancipation. Without taking into question the intentions of researchers committed to these perspectives, critical scholars often concern themselves with ‘elite’ phenomena, such as (fractions within) transnational capitalist classes, through equating the ideational with intellectualism (Sum & Jessop, 2013: 79), and more fundamentally, by adopting a top-down approach that only examines patterns of subjugation and domination at the expense of exploring the tools and processes that can challenge and disrupt these structures (Huke et al, 2015). Although very important to understand, it has been argued convincingly (e.g., Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014: 41; Huke et al, 2015; Wigger, 2016: 141) that such accounts do not provide sufficient space for subaltern agency, the very groups that critical authors seek to emancipate.

The need to discuss strategies for change becomes especially salient in the wake of neoliberalism’s authoritarian turn (Bruff, 2014; [Section 2.3.3](#)). At the same time, the theorization behind the authoritarian argument is flawed. Fundamentally, what this literature fails to fully capture is that violence and authoritarianism can be as much part of the ideational as the material dimension. In the logic of semiosis, one can exclude dissenting views from consideration without seeking recourse to the state’s legal and physical powers. Rather, *semiotic* violence occurs when dissenting views fall outside prevalent illocutionary constraints. Importantly, this need not happen with a formal expansion of state power. As such, to say that “there is no alternative” to neoliberalism is as much a (speech) act of authoritarianism as the currently on-going legal and constitutional encroachments upon the nominally democratic status of (European) polities. For if such a speech act attains perlocutionary success, it has successfully limited the scope within which contestation against its outworkings can conceivably take place. At the same time, speech acts can function as a precursor to physical authoritarianism because they (re)define the boundaries of accepted critique on the system, permeating material retaliation when actors seek to challenge or exit these structures. This shows how the current strand of authoritarian neoliberalist literature is overly material in its outlook, and in need of a perspective such as speech act theory to overcome this shortcoming.

This being said, if critical political economy truly is a philosophy of *praxis*, as Gramsci (1971: Q11, §22: 1425) has suggested, we ought to at least briefly discuss how science can translate into meaningful social change. At the risk of over-simplification, one can fundamentally devise three strategies for critical agents to challenge the system: an inside-out scenario, an outside-in strategy, or a hybrid insider-outsider approach (Orbie et al, 2017). The first entails attempts to change the system solely by partaking in debates organized by the system’s dominant actors. The second would fall in line with anarchist approaches that seek – through the politics of prefiguration and direct action – to

create a new social constellation that could one day replace the existing one (Gordon, 2007; Ferguson, 2011). Finally, there is the hybrid scenario where on the one hand, one participates in all institutional structures to at least superficially impact hegemonic power configurations. On the other hand, one can attempt to enact discursive and institutional changes by challenging the system from the outside in the hope of altering what is semiotically permeable and materially possible.

In the logic of semiosis, one should be skeptical as to the potential for success of the insider and outside-in strategy. Discursive and institutional selectives entrap all, and it is hard if not impossible to avoid all legal and social structures without isolating oneself. In fact, it might make any attempt at devising an entirely new structure *incommensurable* with the existing one (cf. Kuhn, 1962), thereby only making social change harder to achieve. Moreover, it is hardly possible to even imagine a scenario where one could truly break free from the linguistic and extra-linguistic structures that comprise the social world. Language, history, institutions, social practices, and even the capitalist system itself are inherently filled with meanings that structure thought by reducing and ordering the set of interpretations of the social world. Without familiarizing oneself with these structures (i.e., learning the language, adopting social conventions, educating oneself of the history and workings of capitalism), one cannot attempt to break free from them. And when you do know them, you have become part of the system and the system has become part of you. For this reason, the best compromise from a theoretical perspective in achieving change would be the hybrid insider-outsider approach. On the one hand, this means attempts at change remain commensurable with the current system, but it still provides ample space for critique and to slowly work towards a system equipped with discursive and institutional selectives to one's own predilection.

#### 2.4. *Synopsis and conclusion*

This chapter has drawn out a theoretical interpretation of how speech acts can be embedded into critical theory and built a framework that can explain the coherence paradox. The first task was to outline how speech act theory has been traditionally and historically employed, first in linguistics, and later in other fields closer to international political economy. It was concluded that the theory can never serve as a full account for social phenomena, and must be amended ontologically by giving equal footing to the material and by envisioning speech acts as part of semiosis. Semiosis forms the ontological and theoretical bridge to critical theory. After first outlining the critical realist ontology, the movement towards a 'logic of action' was made, inspired by the levels of the real, the actual and the empirical. First, historical materialism and the inherently contradictory nature of capitalism form the generative mechanisms of the "real". Second, Neo-Gramscian scholarship on civil society and hegemonic discourses plus Poulantzas' conception of the state translate historical materialism to the "actual". Finally, the real and actual show how agents within the "empirical" are constrained,

Although the various strategic selectives can also enable. The process that not only links all three levels together, but also speech act theory and critical theory is semiosis. Semiosis shows how the production, contestation, and reproduction of social reality is always a process of sense- and meaning-making, wherein agents are influenced by and subsequently contributing to structural realities. As such, speech acts might begin as simple rhetoric at the level of the empirical, but if they are felicitous they might penetrate the generative mechanisms of the actual and the real, thereby informing new speech acts in the process. The agenda for the remainder of this thesis will be to analyze the rise of policy coherence with these ideas.

### 3. Research strategy

This chapter translates the abstract mechanisms and concepts from the theoretical framework into a strategy to analyze the rise of policy coherence for development. To this end, the first step is to translate the semiotic cycle into propositions that capture the relation between the theory-informed mechanisms and real-world events concerning the rise of policy coherence. Next, the epistemological and methodological underpinnings to study the actualization of the propositions is outlined. Finally, the chapter discusses how to interpret strategic selectives and speech acts.

#### 3.1. Central propositions

This section will apply the theoretical framework to the research question that is central to this thesis: *‘What explains the expanding use of “coherence” as a signifier for external EU policy vis-à-vis less industrialized countries?’* and outline what is necessary to answer it.

The essential mechanism behind the rise of policy coherence is the semiotic machine that at any time constrains and enables certain courses of action which lead to the (re) production of linguistic and extra-linguistic structures. As such, this process and its cyclical nature should be taken as a vantage point for studying the rise of policy. Because agents enter a pre-structured world, the point of entry in our explanandum are the *structural and illocutionary constraints* yielded by the inherently contradictory nature of capitalism. Specifically, these are the global instabilities that have ensued over the last decades in both the global North and South, as well as the recurring political and economic crises in the South after the transitioning towards a neoliberal development trajectory. This reality has arguably undermined the legitimacy of EU development policy. How can development aid ever be effective when these efforts are tarnished by global macro-economic instabilities and an exploitative division of labor between North and South? Beyond internal contestation, the model of market-led and export-oriented external EU economic policy has also come under threat from both the outside due to the rise of credible alternatives to the EU model of development such as Brazil and China. At the same time, the necessity to continue and increase capital accumulation persists for EU elites. As such, the semiotic cycle forces the Commission to utter a speech act to acknowledge the shortcomings in its own model of capital accumulation.

This speech act achieves two things. First, it reconciles contradicting material interests with a common ideational reality: A speech act that at once acknowledges the inherent limitations of capitalism (to avoid incoherencies) while also embracing capitalism to overcome its self-inflicted wounds (foster synergies). Second, if the *speech act* attains *perlocutionary success*, this impedes the ability for both critical and pro-market actors to voice their concerns, because the coherence speech act functions as an organizing narrative on external (aid) policy, in turn instigating discursive and institutional

selectivities and their hereto-related stimulation of path-dependent trajectories by limiting what actors can speak of when talking about ‘development’. Because the selectives likely induce proclivities to accept capitalism’s contradictory nature, we should see this affect the structure of the debate on EU external aid policy. Hereby, policy coherence is both a discourse and a social practice. However, if these practices at the European level are not sufficient to stabilize capitalism’s contradictory nature, we should expect the generative mechanism of historical materialism to actualize a global spread of coherence, and function as an overall *sense- and meaning-making* effort of the European Commission to deal with the inconsistencies and instabilities that appertain to the nature of capitalism itself.

When condensing the theoretical application, we end up with the following three propositions, one for each phase in the semiotic cycle, and in themselves actualizations of the generative mechanisms of the real.

Structural and illocutionary constraints:

**P<sub>1</sub>:** The inherently contradictory structure of capitalism pushes the EC to utter the speech act “policy coherence”, including its strategic selectives.

Speech act and perlocutionary function:

**P<sub>2</sub>:** By uttering the speech act “policy coherence”, the EC induces strategic selectivities that pressure potential opponents to accept the inherently contradictory structure of capitalism.

Sense- and meaning making:

**P<sub>3</sub>:** The speech act of “policy coherence” and its strategic selectives spread the inherently contradictory structure of capitalism.

The propositions represent a unification of theory-informed mechanisms with their (expected) actualizations in the forms of events and empirical phenomena. Before turning to a discussion on how one should study these propositions, we must first briefly conceptualize what this thesis means with policy coherence itself.

Although many definitions and conceptualizations have been proposed in the literature (Forster & Stokke, 1999; Hoebink, 1999; Picciotto, 2005; Carbonne, 2008; EC, 2009; Siitonen, 2016; Sianes, 2017), none successfully delves into the generative mechanisms of capitalism and semiosis behind coherence. At its core, this thesis regards policy coherence as an expression of the *relation between the EU and less industrialized countries*, and the extent to which one can *reconcile capitalist trajectories of development with broader external goals* such as labor rights, environmental sustainability,

human rights, and economic stability. This frees coherence from being strictly limited to the historical confines of its first articulation in its linguistic denotation (1992). Consequently, this conception opens up the possibility that agents discuss coherence without mentioning the concept's name. This matters, because in the logic of the definition above, policy coherence is but a signifier of a much deeper and more fundamental debate on the relation between North and South<sup>11</sup>.

Practically speaking, recent discussions around coherence are – in this light – struggles around the (in)ability to pair different connotations of North-South relations with the linguistic denotation of policy coherence. The necessity to pursue policy coherence (for development) may theoretically mean that it is hardly possible to reconcile aid and non-aid policies, while it may also mean that the development and non-development agendas are not at odds with the interests of Southern countries, but still house unused potential. The theory sees semiosis and the necessity to stabilize the inherently contradictory nature of capitalism as a sense- and meaning-making machine that over time impacts the ability to pair certain connotations with linguistic denotations. Concretely speaking, one can devise five ideal types of coherence that capture the full spectrum of the relation between North and South: Coherence by default, Coherence by design, Coherence as an institutional problem, Coherence as a fundamental problem, and Coherence as impossibility.

*Coherence by default* entails the assumption that policy areas such as trade enhance the development of less industrialized countries without negative externalities. *Coherence by design* assumes that fundamental contradictions between policy areas do not exist, but stresses a role for coordination to make the most of possible synergies between different policy areas. *Coherence as an institutional problem* emphasizes the negative but deems capitalism's contradictions solvable with sufficient political will and institutional reform. *Coherence as a fundamental problem* approaches incoherencies more critically, assuming that coherence (on any policy area) is only possible with large sectorial sacrifices. For instance, that development in the South is only possible if the current international trade and intellectual property regimes are fundamentally reformed. Finally, *Coherence as impossibility* goes one step further by claiming that aid and non-aid policy areas are impossible to reconcile because capitalism is and remains exploitative by default. Although the ideal types can exist in theory, the crucial test will be to see how agents have employed the concept of Coherence over time.

In sum, the three propositions and their effect on the ability to pair the idealtypical connotations with the linguistic denotations regarding the concept of policy coherence stand central to explore in the analysis. Now that it is clear what will be studied, the next step is to outline how this should be accomplished, and for that a discussion on epistemology and methodology is in order.

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<sup>11</sup>Admittedly, this opens up the thesis to a Popperian rebuke: how can one falsify such an elusive phenomenon? This thesis argues that the benefits of a holistic explanation outweigh the costs of rigorous falsificationism (reductionism).

### 3.2. *Epistemology and retroduction*

This thesis employs a critical realist vision on ontology. An attractive feature of critical realism is its holistic view on the social world. It does not regard ontology as a layer of metaphysics better not discussed, but rather as another layer of abstraction between the real and the empirical. As such, critical realism is also a philosophy of science, one that this thesis draws inspiration from.

Critical realists go beyond positivist and relativist approaches to social science. On the one hand, equating observation to law-like generalizations mistakes the transitive dimension for the intransitive. On the other hand, by not explicitly carving out a role for structures, one suffers from a tendency of infinite hermeneutics without ever accessing the generative mechanisms of the social world. Therefore, critical realism posits the existence of an open-ended multi-layered ontology. When climbing down the ladder of abstraction, these ontological tenets hold implications for how critical realists conduct science. Most importantly, critical realists give primacy to ontology over epistemology (Archer et al, 2013; Patomäki & Wight, 2002). Therefore, the object of study – the generative mechanisms in the real – should be discussed prior to any attempt to create new knowledge on the subject matter. This discussion is also useful to overcome an important caveat, namely the fallacy of our own knowledge and experiences. Consistent with the semiotic cycle, new knowledge must necessarily be based on a transformation of existing knowledge (Joseph & Wight 2010: 13). As such, the goal of a critical realist study is to navigate between its epistemological relativism and ontological realism, and see which approach (in the form of theory) is most effective in transcending the situational, fragmentary, and contingent nature of knowledge (Bhaskar, 2008).

Critical realists employ theory as a tool for sense-making. The key method of inquiry is *retroduction*. Contrary to induction (accumulating observations to reveal patterns and regularities) and deduction (assessing conjectures based on prior knowledge of the explanandum), retroduction asks what the real must be like for a specific mechanism or sets of mechanisms to plausibly form an explanation of the observed events (Jessop, 2005: 41; Easton, 2010). This provides space for researchers to bring in the ontology since it tasks us to go beyond observations (Downward & Mearman, 2006: 12). As a method of action, it tasks researchers to go from simple and abstract concepts and categories to increasingly concrete and complex ones (Sum & Jessop, 2013: 7; Sayer, 1992: 107). By doing this, one first establishes the mechanisms and (counter) tendencies one deems possible in a specific context (Jessop & Sum, 2006: 43). These can act as heuristic tools to make sense of the many contingencies found in the social world. As one starts analyzing the phenomena within a predetermined spatio-temporal context, the researcher subsequently refines and acuminates concepts and categories by staging an interrogative discussion between theory and observation (Wight, 2006). Thereby, one moves between different layers of abstraction in pursuit of understanding the intransitive dimension.

When the sense-making part by means of retroduction is finished, researchers subsequently engage in meaning-making by transforming existing knowledge into new insights aiming to approach the causal powers of the real. Beyond this, researchers can also contribute to meaning-making by positioning their research as an (emancipatory) speech act that exposes latent power-relations and reads discursive self-presentations of the actors under investigation against the grain.

On the topic of speech acts, studying them in social contexts usually goes hand in hand with either interpretivist approaches using hermeneutic methods or with postmodernist approaches deploying critical discourse analysis (e.g., McDonald, 2008; Balzacq et al, 2016: 519-520). However, both in ontological and epistemological outlook, this thesis goes beyond the lived experience of social actors (interpretivism) while also posing that truths and knowledge are not simply part of a socially constructed system of linguistic contingencies (postmodernism) (see also Jones, 2011: 202-205 and Balzacq, 2010: 31). Practically speaking, this means it is perfectly possible to study speech acts in a more rigorous, systematic, and even quantitative manner, so long as the basic retroductive method of inquiry is observed. Although it may seem counter-intuitive and even reductionist to reduce social contingencies to categories or numbers, the only thing that matters for critical realists is the primacy of mechanisms; to articulate why a particular number or statistic is an actualization of a mechanism at a particular time and place and what this means for the theory. At the same time, one should be very cautious as to use (quantitative) data to generalize and make predictions, since this goes beyond the explanandum under investigation, while the inferential logic behind generalization is based on positivist assumptions of causation amounting to constant conjunctions at the level of the empirical.

### *3.3. Methodological triangulation*

To put the retroductive method of inquiry into practice, critical realists employ triangulation. Triangulation entails the combination of different independent insights (be that data, time periods, or even methodologies) to study social phenomena (Downward & Mearman, 2006: 2). A key reason to employ triangulation is its validity-enhancing nature; if multiple independent points of inquiry and/or observation unambiguously point to one outcome being the most plausible, it greatly adds to the researches' credibility (ibid.). Another reason to seek recourse to different entry-points is a pragmatic one: usually resorting to one single entry-point such as official policy documents will at best paint a haphazard and incomplete image and at worst a distorted one, since knowledge itself cannot be considered strictly neutral. Complementing any single stream of information with multiple independent streams therefore enhances the likelihood one captures the full picture. This thesis employs methodological triangulation while also making use of different data sources to base the various methods on. The used methods are: an explanatory narrative, expert interviews, and discourse network analysis.

### *3.3.1. Explanatory narrative*

An explanatory narrative outlines a certain set of events by making theory-informed choices as to what story the events tell and what the causal relation between them is (Ryan, 2016). As such, it is not a mere description of what happened, but a retroductive exercise sees how generative mechanisms actualize into events in a historical timeframe (Klauck, 2016). The analysis in this thesis is structured as one overarching explanatory narrative within which the actualization of the proposition-informed mechanisms is studied by making use of all three research methods. It makes sense to structure the presentation and analysis of the empirical material along such a theory-informed logic because contradictions in capitalism arise out of historical events. In terms of timeframe, the range of events spans 1957-2017, starting at the entry into force of the Treaty of Rome, and ending with the signature of a new European Consensus on Development. Although this timeframe is very broad, not every period is studied in the same detail because most developments have taken place after the signature of the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992. Beyond the material yielded from the two additional research methods (outlined below), the explanatory narrative makes use of primary and secondary sources in the form of official documents such as green- and white papers, media articles, policy papers, research papers, and position papers.

### *3.3.2. Expert interviews*

Because these documents do not tell the full story and cannot reveal what is written between the lines, this thesis also makes use of semi-structured expert interviews to further substantiate the historical narrative. Expert interviews are well known for their ability to reveal latent motivations, preferences, structural constraints, and procedural details (Rathbun, 2008). The ultimate aim of expert interviews is to establish a semi-structured conversation with the interviewee which leads to nonattributable statements if it is on the record, or general background information if it is off the record. To this end, in preparation of the interview, an interview guide has been drafted that serves as a general guideline for the topics that the discussion aims to cover ([Appendix I](#)). Semi-structured interviews provide an open-ended and naturally flowing discussion while limiting the potential to wander off-topic (Leech, 2002). These advantages notwithstanding, conducting interviews comes with a caveat: strategic reconstruction (Rathbun, 2008: 11). Either unintentionally or surreptitiously, an interview partner might give a distorted recollection of events. Therefore, it is imperative to achieve a sort of triangulation among interview partners, which means that one approaches participants from multiple perspectives to reduce the likelihood of strategic reconstruction.

For this thesis, three groups of actors are relevant: members of the European Commission working with or on PCD, representatives from civil society, and Member State officials. From these groups, a total of nine people have been approached and six have been interviewed. The interview partners were

promised anonymity which the researcher ensures by not revealing their names or specific institutional affiliation. Two interviews have not been recorded because of an on-the-spot decision made at the discretion of the researcher. At the beginning of the interview, the interviewees were pointed to the possibility to make off-the-record comments at any time. Two persons made use of this ability.

### *3.3.3. Discourse network analysis*

Finally, the thesis uses a method known as discourse network analysis. Discourse network analysis is a hybrid approach that combines the strengths of content analysis and social network analysis. It outputs network graphs that one can use to describe the way political discourses (such as the discourse around policy coherence) are structured and infer from this how actors influence each other over time (Leifeld, 2017: 2). This approach is ideally suited to analyze the mechanism behind the second proposition, i.e., how actors self-define the extent to which Northern interests are compatible with the development in the global South, and see how these self-definitions transform over time. It is ideally suited because political discourse is inherently a network phenomenon (ibid.). When actors engage in the semiotic cycle, their statements (denotations) constitute a relational action because every speech act is aimed at an audience. Based on its reception by the audience, the speech act subsequently produces or reproduces meanings over time. An approach such as discourse network analysis represents a systematic opportunity to study speech acts in their full relational context. Conducting such an analysis is rather complex and entails many considerations. The methodological considerations (coding and visualization) are outlined below. The technicalities are explained in [Appendix III](#).

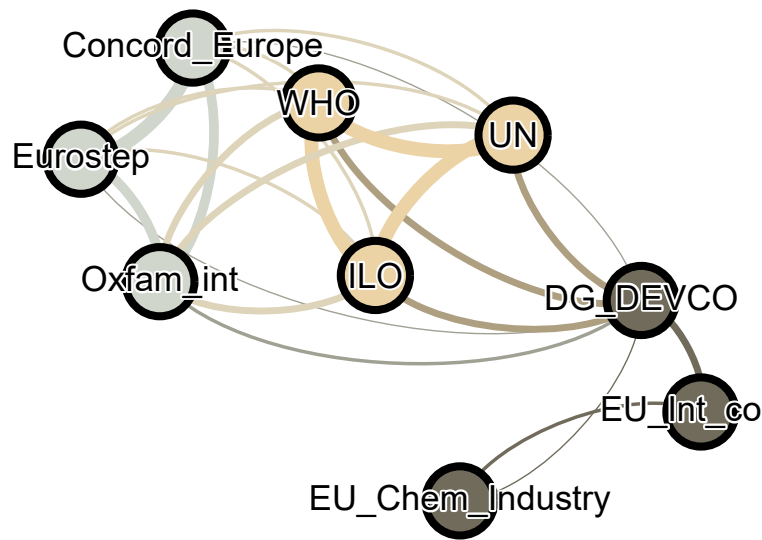
Firstly, one has to determine what content will be coded. For the topic of this thesis, the goal is to capture the structure of debates on policy coherence in the European context. Content analysis is always delineated by the researcher's choices for sampling and coding (ibid; Krippendorff, 2004). First of all, one must know which documents will be sampled, during which time period, and from which database. The choice can either be to sample documents randomly or nonrandom. Random sampling means that every document has an equal chance of selection, while nonrandom selection means that one exhausts every single unit within the population of documents (Neuendorff, 2002). Neither method is inherently better, and the choice usually comes down to practical issues such as sample size and document availability (ibid.). For this thesis, nonrandom selection is used in the form of contributions to the public consultations of DG DEVCO on its development policy in the period 2005-2016. Specifically, the consultations of 2005 on the establishment of a European Consensus on Development, 2012 on a post-2015 agenda, and 2016, on how to implement the Sustainable Development Goals are used. The reason to opt for public consultations is twofold. First, because they are important moments that force actors to make explicit their position on a subject matter. Second, because no other centralized database able to make a better (non)random selection exists.

Secondly, one has to decide how meaning is inferred from the documents in a theoretically-informed way. This is usually done with a codebook. Codebooks are rules for how one extracts meanings from the messages under investigation (be that texts, symbols, and/or audiovisual data) (Gheyle & Jacobs, 2017). A codebook must be exhaustive as to the possible ways to categorize meanings and unambiguous as to the possibility of one meaning falling in one category (Krippendorff, 2004, chapter 7). It gains additional importance since there is only one coder involved in this study, meaning that inter-coder reliability (to ensure that one's work is replicable) is not available. Dependent on the nature of the study, codebooks can be drafted beforehand in a deductive manner or conjoined with the coding process in an inductive manner. The latter is well suited for exploratory research, but for the purpose of the thesis, a pre-determined codebook is essential because inductively inventing new codes during the analysis would produce a distorted network graph and also undermines replicability. In line with the theoretical approach, statements in the consultations are treated as linguistic denotations of the five idealtypical connotations of Coherence. The debate on policy coherence forces actors to make explicit their stance on the extent to which Northern interests and capitalism itself are reconcilable with economic and non-economic goals in the South. Due to the nature of the discourse network analyzer software (Leifeld et al, 2018), codes must be framed as a binaries that actors can agree or disagree with. As such, a statement is either an expression of agreement or of disagreement with the five Coherence ideal types. The exact rules for demarcating the statements can be found in the codebook ([Appendix II](#)).

Thirdly, when the coding of the documents is complete, one can subsequently visualize the data in two different and complementary ways. Firstly, the data yields a *one-mode* congruence or co-occurrence network. This type of graph shows the relation between *actors* (hence the one-mode). Based on the number of shared understandings (connotations), actors will group closer together and form clusters of their own. If they have fewer shared understandings, they will be farther apart from the more dissimilar actors. In Figure 4, one sees a simplified version of the network based on the 2005 consultation on a European Consensus for Development. It is apparent that there are three different clusters (color-coded) within which actors ('nodes') group together. They are tied together with links ('edges') of varying thickness, indicating the degree of cohesion of their positions on Coherence. It also shows that organizations such as Concord Europe and Eurostep on the one hand and DG DEVCO and the European Chemical Industry Council on the other hand hold more shared understandings within their cluster than between the different clusters.

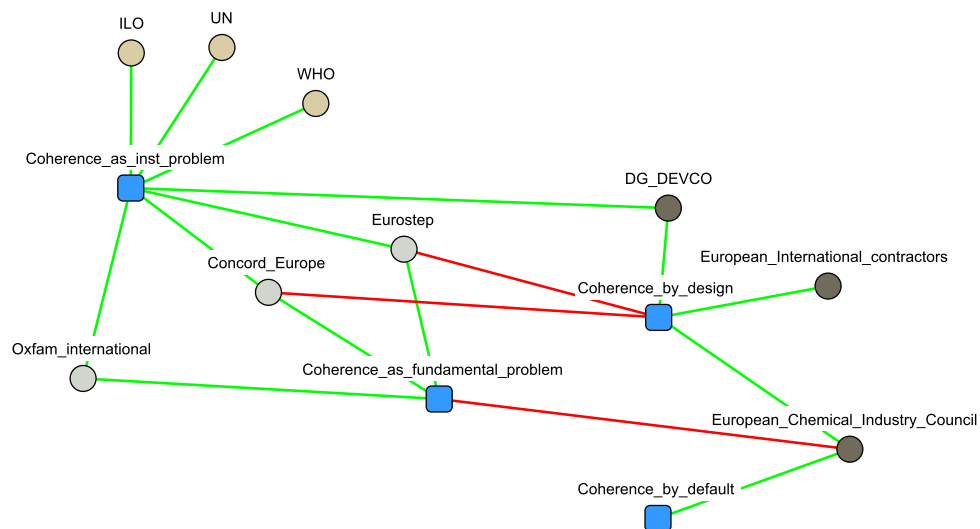
At the same time, the graph tells us nothing about the nature of the actors' (dis)agreements. To learn what connotations on Coherence the actors agree and disagree on, we can make use of the *two-mode* affiliation network. This network shows the relation between *agent* and *concept* (hence the

**Figure 4:** Sample co-occurrence network



two-mode). Color-coding is the same as for the co-occurrence network. Figure 5 makes clear that Concord and Eurostep hold a rather critical view on the notion of Coherence. They both agree with the connotation of coherence as an institutional and fundamental problem (indicated by a green edge) and disagree that coherence can be achieved by design (indicated by a red edge). On the other hand, DG DEVCO and the Chemical Industry Council agree that Coherence can be achieved by design. At the same time, DG DEVCO also sees Coherence as an institutional problem, whereas the Chemical Industry Council uttered a statement indicating that Coherence is actually achieved by default. This illustrates how even actors of the same clusters can hold differing positions.

**Figure 5:** Sample affiliation network



The two networks combined tell a complete and theoretically informed story on the structure of EU discourse on policy coherence. The analysis will compare the evolution of the networks over time to see if and how positions on development policy have shifted over the years.

### 3.4. *Interpreting strategic selectivity*

The final step in preparation of the empirical analysis is to articulate the expected actualization of the concepts of speech acts and strategic selectives.

First off, *speech acts* are utterances that perform real-world actions. They always come in three, because every speech act contains a message (locutionary act) sent with a motivation (illocutionary act) and a real-world effect (perlocutionary act). At the micro-level, the locutionary act is easy to identify because it amounts to a bijective signifier in the form of a sentence. However, as this thesis also envisions the existence of macro-level speech acts, locutionary acts can exist as an entire text such as a speech or a position paper. As for the illocutionary motivation and perlocutionary effect, it immediately becomes clear why it is necessary to always study speech acts without isolating them from their social context. Speech acts are not self-referential, and without knowing the broader social and structural position of the locutor, we cannot reasonably expect to understand why a speech act was made or what its effect on the receptive audience has been. Therefore, this thesis operationalizes speech acts in their totality by always examining their historical context and situational logic; this, combined with theoretical mechanisms of semiosis and contradictions in capitalism can reveal the motivations of the locutor and the effects on the interlocutor(s) and the broader linguistic and extra-linguistic structures.

*Strategic selectives* are an important mechanism to understand the motivations behind and consequences of speech acts. Strategic selectives are deep-seated proclivities that favor certain trajectories over others (Jessop, 1999; Sum & Jessop, 2013: 214-217). Selectives exist both in structural and agential form, and in both sense- and meaning-making stages. Firstly, when agents engage in (strategic) behavior, their choices are necessarily limited and ordered by discourses (Flores Farfan & Holzscheiter 2010: 141). A discourse therefore is a set of ideas that translates into social conventions about how to think and act. These conventions affect all actors, including governments, private actors, and civil society. *Discursive selectives*, meanwhile, are those sense-making ideas that recur within a discourse with a distinctive enabling and constraining force (Sum & Jessop, 2013: 214-215). For instance, ‘policy coherence is necessary to harness untapped potential for synergies between aid and non-aid policies’ is a discursive selective that provides a connotation to coherence because aid and non-aid policies can no longer be seen as fundamentally at odds with one another. Going into the meaning-making stage, agents possess the potential to engage in strategic action by articulating ideas and the limitations of one discourse in a novel way. *Agential selectives* also depend on the capacity

of agents to make themselves heard, i.e., their ability to act in a coherent and collective manner to either challenge or reproduce the currently hegemonic discourse (Sum & Jessop, 2013: 217). Finally, *institutional selectives* entail the differing potential for actors to achieve perlocutionary success. As an example, the structure of the European Commission makes lobbying easier for private actors because of lax rules on lobbying and transparency, creating – sectoral differences notwithstanding – a positive correlation between funds, access, and influence (Corporate Europe Observatory, 2015; Horn & Wigger, 2016: 120-121). Important to emphasize is that speech acts and selectives are strongly intertwined. Selectives always inform speech acts and affect their potential of perlocutionary success, but a successful speech act might also transform into a selective of its own. As such, a complete picture of the theoretical concepts can only arise when these interrelations are taken into account.

#### 4. Analysis: The Rise of Coheritization

This chapter stages an interrogative discussion between the theory-informed propositions and the empirical materials as specified in the previous chapter. The chapter is divided in three sections; one for each phase in the process from coherence to coheritization. Every phase contains an analysis to see if, how, and to what extent the semiotic mechanisms as described in the propositions are actualized. Phase 1 spans 1957-2005 and discusses the fragmentary and contested system of global capitalism and its effects on the Commission's position on Coherence. Next, Phase 2 (2005-2015) analyzes the changes in the discursive and institutional landscape around EU external policy after the first Coherence speech act. Finally, Phase 3 (2015-now) sees how the lack of internal consensus at the European level combined with on-going (if not aggravating) contradictions in capitalism have forced the Commission to spread coherence to the global level.

##### *4.1. From illocutionary enablement to illocutionary entanglement*

Discussions on the interactions among and contradictions between different (development) and non-development policies go back to post-WWII discussions on external policy (Hydén, 1999: 64-73; Tinbergen, 1952: 68). Fundamentally, the inevitable contradictions arising between the economic and political structures that maintain capitalism and the resulting inequalities and exploitation between and within states have always required stabilization. At least in the initial post-war decades, the system of capitalism itself has been fragmentary, marked by the availability of alternatives (until 1992) and the necessity for capitalist elites to seek consent rather than coercion to establish hegemony (until 2005). Regarding the developmental sphere, it has long been argued that the interplay between policy areas such as development, trade, migration, finance, security, agriculture and fishery, and monetary policy negatively impacts development of the South (Knoll, 2014). This section will show how – within a framework of persistently present but ever-changing contradictions – the fragmentary nature of the global capitalist system has been a device of illocutionary enablement; it has provided space for fundamental criticism that in turn pushed the Commission to utter the speech act “policy coherence” to – at least tacitly – acknowledge the contradictions in its external policy. At the same time, the price for the Coherence speech act was illocutionary entanglement because avenues for fundamental criticism were subsequently closed off.

##### *4.1.1. From Rome to Maastricht: varieties of coherence*

The way in which the European (Economic) Community has defined itself in relation to less industrialized countries (i.e., coherence) is intertwined with the Communities' institutional history. Development policy has been a core part of European external policy from the outset. The 1957 Treaty of Rome saw the creation of ‘the association of overseas countries and territories’, which had the purpose

‘to promote the economic and social development of the countries and territories and to establish close economic relations between them and the Community as a whole’ (Hoebink, 2004: 26; Orbie, 2012). Key to this association system was to give (former) colonies and overseas territories special access to the Community market, and to disburse aid through the European Development Fund (Orbie, 2012: 18-19). Thus, from the beginning, the two main tools for development were trade and direct financial transfers. Decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s led to many newly independent states seeking to maintain their access to the Community market and European Development funds. This resulted in the creation of the Yaoundé Conventions (1964 & 1969), signed between the Community and various African nations (Hoebink, 2004).

The 1970s saw a trend where European development gradually focused less on its former colonies, first and foremost with the Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP). The GSP provided small reductions in tariffs for countries outside the Yaoundé Conventions in the Asian and Latin-American regions (Siles-Brügge, 2014: 49-50). The accession of the United Kingdom to the European Community also necessitated a new convention detailing the relationship between the Community and overseas territories, materializing in the Lomé Convention 1975. The Lomé convention detailed the exact privileges given to the newly formed group of African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) nations and the Community, most important of which was a System for the Stabilization of Export Earnings (STABEX) (Hurt, 2003: 160). On the side of developing nations, a major advancement was the formation of the New International Economic Order, an ambitious attempt to transform the political and economic order of global capitalism to be more coherent with the goals of the South (Ryner & Cafruny, 2016: 198). However, the window of opportunity soon closed (see below) and developing countries were once again relegated to a secondary role in shaping global capitalism.

Up until the 1970s, the relationship between donor and recipient countries was based mainly on non-reciprocity. This *embedded liberalism* is reflected in the dominant development paradigms of the 1960s (‘comprehensive planning’) and 1970s (‘integrated development’) (Hydén, 1999: 64-73). The former aims to enhance and accelerate development by devising economic plans that focus on building up heavy industry. As sectors would later become efficient and profitable, they unlock potential for further development. Meanwhile, the thought behind integrated development was that aid would be ineffective and scattered if implementation would be handled by different institutions. Therefore, bringing the planning, design, and implementation under one banner would prevent incoherencies. These paradigms were strongly inspired by dependency theory, which stipulates that underdevelopment is caused by a skewed and exploitative division of labor where developing regions are left behind because they merely serve as bases for resource extraction, hampering their potential for further development. (Prebisch, 1950; Hudec 2011; Lang, 2011). To level the playing field, dependency theorists

called for development-related exemptions from liberalization commitments, in terms of protecting developing markets and by receiving preferential access to developed markets.

These dependency theory-inspired paradigms would soon be turned on their respective heads, because the next decades denote profound change in the material and ideational structure of global capitalism. In the early 1980s, dependency theory was displaced by the rise of neoliberalism – the state-led reorganization of social forces towards a society where market-forces prevail (Bruff, 2014). The neoliberal paradigm changed global development because it made aid to countries most in need of assistance conditional upon macro-economic reforms and liberalization of financial markets (Hydén, 1999: 69). Hereby, all other policy goals, including development, were subordinated towards these structural reforms. This new paradigm – introduced by the World Bank and the IMF – was, by the mid-1980s, adopted by all major capitalist donors.

This transformation is reflective of the broader changes in the structure of global capitalism after the 1970s. One of the most important reasons for promoting development policy in the first place is so that the impact of colonial relations of surplus extraction could be limited but also subsist (Bieler, 2015; Amin, 1976: 185-190). Another reason was the hope that development policy could limit the sphere of influence of the Soviet-Union (Forrster & Stokke, 1999a: 46-47). However, the contradictory nature of capitalism also forced capitalists in the North to increasingly export their profits, mostly through Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) (Bieler, 2015: 4). This allowed for limited industrialization in Southern countries. At the same time, a number of serious crises in the North destabilized the division of labor with the South. Stagflation crises induced by overaccumulation, the collapse of the Bretton Woods monetary system, and rising Northern indebtedness to oil-exporting nations opened up agential selectives for the South to mobilize and change the structure of global capitalism. However, these efforts were only partially successful. On the one hand, the dependency theory-inspired critique of the Western model led to several favorable trade concessions in the Lomé convention, a “Part IV” on “Trade and Development” in the GATT, and a 1979 “enabling clause” under UNCTAD’s GSP. On the other hand, these concessions failed to materialize into concrete results for developing countries because strategic and highly competitive sectors in Western countries remained firmly protected (Rodrik, 2001). More fundamentally, the foundation of the New International Economic Order – which approached Coherence as a deep-seated problem requiring fundamental political-economic recalibration to Southern interests – failed to gain traction in international bodies (Amin, 1982) and the movement itself collapsed in the 1980s in the wake of successive debt crises in the South (Ryner & Cafruny, 2016: 198).

The crises-induced necessity for stabilization in the North culminated both in material and ideological terms in the structural adjustment programs introduced in the 1980s and the Washington

Consensus more broadly in 1989 (Williamson, 2004; Skovgaard Poulsen, 2015: 15). The meaning of coherence in this decade thereby shifted to Coherence by default. Macro-economic stability and a liberalized economy open to international finance became pre-conditions for development. This arguably induced a discursive selective with regard to development: when one talks about development, one actually talks about neoliberal *economic* development. Consequently, successive iterations of the Lomé conventions (Lomé III in 1985 and Lomé IV in 1990) included this logic of conditionality for the access of aid funds – under fierce protest of ACP nations (Elgström & Pilegaard, 2008: 367-370). These developments show how a variety of coherencies have existed over time and space, fluctuating between Coherence as an impossibility (if we include non-capitalist frameworks) to Coherence by default. It also shows how the material and the ideational, and agency and structure are spheres that are distinct but also interrelated, symbiotically interacting through the process of semiosis, exemplified by the transition between dependency theory and neoliberalism. This section sets the stage for the 1990s, where one could expect the lifting of the iron curtain and the political-economic instabilities caused by the prevailing Washington Consensus principles to once again affect the relation between North and South.

#### *4.1.2. From Maastricht to the ECD: road to the semiotic center*

In the 1990s, the idea of policy coherence as a specific policy goal materialized. Coherence was discussed during a high-level meeting in the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Cooperation and Economic Development (OECD) in December 1991 (OECD, 1992: 31; Forster & Stokke, 1999a: 16). Here, governments were for the first time asked to take into consideration all aspects of their North-South relations including, but not limited to: macro-economic policies, trade, and migration for their development policies (Forster & Stokke, 1999a: 16). The main concerns among bureaucrats were the effectiveness of aid and, more implicitly, enhancing credibility after the mixed success of four decades of development aid (Horký, 2010: 225; OECD, 1994). At the same time, the concerns were motivated by enlightened self-interest: an effective global economy required a stable integration of the multiplicity of developing and emerging markets into the newly forming multilateral economic system (Forster & Stokke, 1999b).

Development policy itself contradictorily experienced both politicization and de-politicization in the early 1990s. On the one hand, foreign aid became politicized because conditionality for disbursement of aid shifted emphasis from economic to political indicators (Hydén, 1999: 70-73). On the other hand, the idea of foreign aid itself was de-politicized domestically due to its decreased political salience in a post-Communist world. This, combined with a general ‘fatigue’ among policy-makers and donors due to lackluster results created a climate where aid budgets were slashed (EC, 1996; Forster, 1999: 301; Verschaeve et al, 2016: 47). It would be no overstatement to claim that development policy was

in need of an overhaul by providing a new paradigm. The new paradigm would have to be sensitive to the (enlightened) self-interest of Western donors. This *could* be done by discursively and institutionally tying the notion that integrating developing countries into Western economic and political structures requires effective aid. Effective aid, in turn, is greatly impacted by interlinkages and the degree of (in)coherence of aid and non-aid policies (Sianes, 2017). Indeed, the idea in the Commission rose that “if you stay in your silo, you will not be effective” (interview 2). As such, policy coherence for development and a ‘whole-of-government’ approach would be a necessary condition for a stable capitalist system. Such a semiotic shift would require a recalibration from Coherence by default to Coherence as an institutional problem. Consistent with the theory and with the retroductive logic of critical realism, we would have to observe a speech act that ties effective aid to policy coherence.

When turning from the OECD to the EU, we indeed see such a coherence speech act arise in the early 1990s. The 1992 Maastricht Treaty established a legal basis for PCD within the European Union. Coherence is part of the ‘triple-C’ approach to developmental policy, with complementarity (Member States and the EU sharing competence) and coordination (EU and Member states consulting one another on their aid programs) completing the trinity. Zooming in specifically on coherence, Article 130V of the Maastricht Treaty stipulates that:

“The Community shall *take account of the objectives* referred to in Article 130U in the policies that it implements which are likely to affect developing countries” (EU, 1992: 60, emphasis added).

While Article 130U states that:

“Community policy in the sphere of development cooperation, which shall be *complementary* to the policies pursued by the Member States, shall foster: - the sustainable economic and social development of the developing countries, and more particularly the most disadvantaged among them; - *the smooth and gradual integration of the developing countries into the world economy*; - the campaign against poverty in the developing countries” (EU, 1992: 60, emphasis added).

These texts constitute the locutionary function of policy coherence in its most original shape and form. Meanwhile, the emphasized parts are already partially revealing as to the illocutionary force behind the coherence speech act. For instance, the word ‘coherence’ is not explicitly named in Article 130V. Rather, it has been replaced by a much weaker ‘shall take into account’, which only provides a legal obligation for Member States and the EU to duly consider the impact of their policies on their development agenda without any obligation concrete result (Bartels, 2016). Importantly, the

definition of coherence is of a ‘do-no-harm’ nature, strictly focused on a possible negative relationship between non-development and development policies. However, the treaty does not stipulate how concrete results can be measured or achieved. Finally, consonant with the earlier prediction, Article 130U reveals that beyond poverty reduction, the fundamental goal of development policy is indeed integration of developing countries into the global capitalist system.

On a more abstract level, the Maastricht Treaty hereby introduces both a discursive and institutional selective: *(1) All policy areas are interlinked and not Coherent by default.* The fact that all policy areas are interlinked is something that, post-1992, affected participation of all actors in debates and policy-making processes on external (developmental) policy in both discursive and institutional terms. Although not all agents were ready to accept the primacy of policy coherence for *development*, the process of semiosis can explain why limited progression towards coherence nevertheless was possible during this decade. In brief, one would expect actors to intuitively or even ingeniously act upon the coherence-inspired scope of their discursive playing fields. And indeed, after the perlocutionary success of the coherence speech act, policy coherence – despite its expert-driven and technocratic nature – could also be employed by other agents.

In the early 1990s, civil society groups put pressure on the EU to put the commitments made in the Maastricht Treaty into practice. Campaigns against incoherencies between development policies and EU agricultural subsidies and its fisheries policies put the issue of policy (in)coherencies on the political agenda (Eurostep, 1993; Hoebink, 2004: 200; Siitonen, 2016: 8). As a result, the Commission produced a report that – for the first time – explicitly referred to Article 130V, thus acknowledging the framework of coherence in shaping external policy (EC, 1994). This reveals three interesting facts. First, the way in which the Maastricht Treaty spoke of external policy illocutionarily constrained the possible amount of meanings of external policy. Second, these constraints affect the participation of political actors. Although actors hold their own preferences, those preferences are channeled through the selectivities bound to PCD. Third, it shows how semiosis also enables certain courses of action; in this case, civil society organizations could hold Member States and the EU accountable for incoherencies by exercising a sort of ‘practice what you preach’ strategy. In this sense, no one is immune to the pressure that illocutionary constraints can exert.

Although civil society organizations were successful in their efforts to transform the debate, progress on implementing coherence onto (EU) policy was virtually non-existent throughout the 1990s. Indeed, the 1990s were “a decade of non-decisions” (Carbonne, 2008: 331). At the Member State level, deep divisions existed between countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands, and Denmark who favored more coherence between development, trade, and agriculture, while France and Germany rejected this idea (ibid; Hoebink, 1999; 2004). At the level of the Commission, this intra-EU

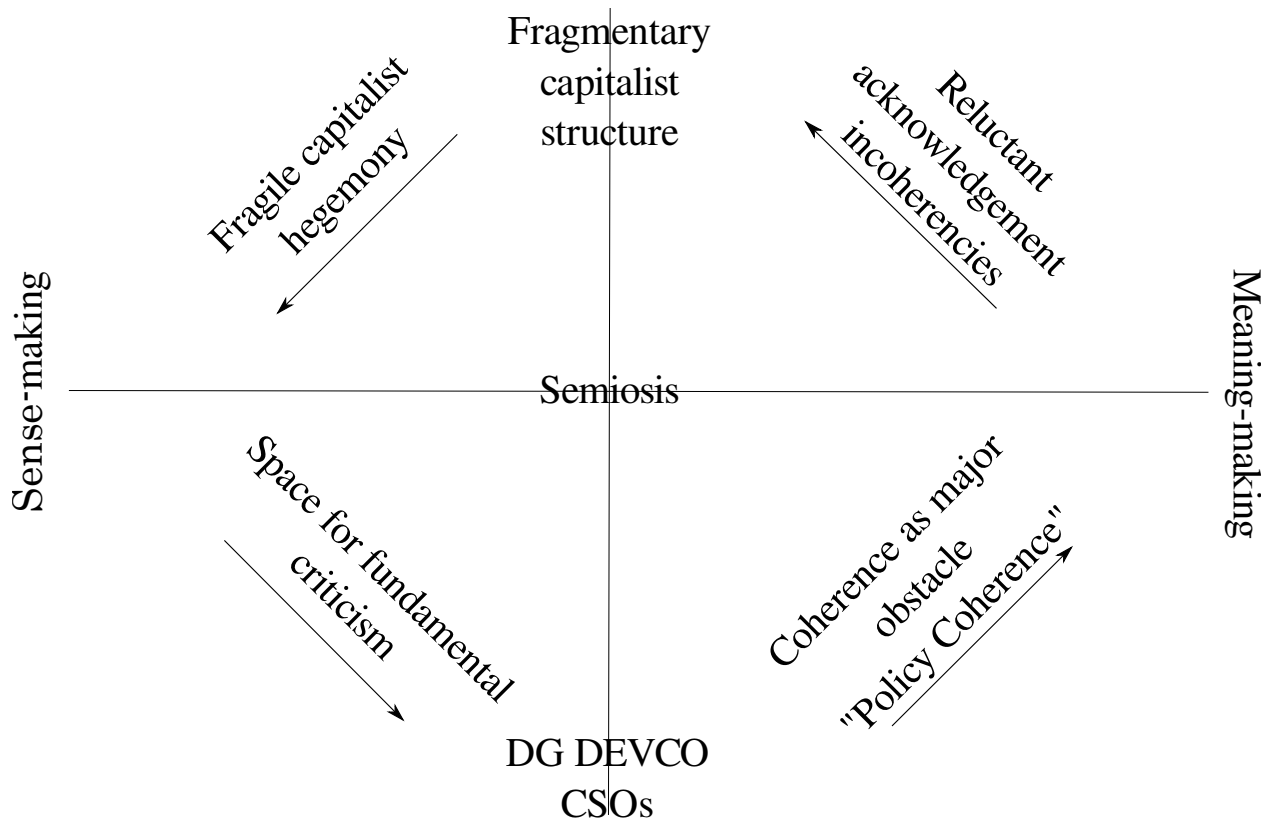
contestation led to a cautious attitude that resulted in little more than vague suggestions that were aimed to raise awareness for possible policy (in) coherencies (Hoebink, 1999). What made matters worse is the ambiguity surrounding the concept of PCD as the Commission provided no clear definition (Verschaeve et al, 2016: 50). Moreover, the Commission experienced a troublesome decade in the 1990s due to a combination of understaffing and poor coordination. Because of this, the Commission failed to exercise an effective role in the development sphere (Orbie, 2012: 19; Holland, 2002: 97), thereby failing to materialize the ambitions spoken out in the rhetoric of the Maastricht Treaty into concrete policy.

Meanwhile, contestation against neoliberal policies and the hereto-related political and economic instabilities contributed to a serious loss of face for global capitalism after the late 1990s. Towards the end of the millennium, the fallout from capitalism's inherent instabilities provided space for civil society organizations towards mass mobilization against global capitalism. In particular, the Jubilee 2000 debt campaign was organized around a one-time debt relief of unpayable debts for the world's poorest countries. Although the campaign itself was no radical alternative to (neoliberal) capitalism, it still exposed the painful and futile results of bondage of the world's poorest countries as a result of their indebtedness (Buxton, 2004; Grenier, 2012). These massive debts in themselves were caused by the movement to financialized capitalism (Schwartz, 2010: 215; 260-261). For the development sphere, this two-faced reality of giving with one hand and destroying with the other raised the issue of policy coherence on the agenda (interview 1). In a more general sense, the so-called alter-globalization campaigns of the late-1990s and early 2000s challenged the Washington Consensus inspired notion of Coherence by default. Clearly, equating development with neoliberal economic development was no longer sufficient.

The sum of these contested elements in EU development policy manifested in the European Consensus on Development (ECD) in 2005. The ECD is a joint communication of the Council, Commission, and Parliament and details the first comprehensive European strategy for promoting development. The document identified twelve policy areas relevant to policy Coherence: trade, environment, climate change, security, agriculture, fisheries, social dimension of globalization, employment and decent work, migration, research and innovation, information society, transport and energy (EC, 2005a.). Moreover, a special PCD-unit tasked with producing a bi-annual report on the progress made towards PCD was established within DG Development, (ibid.). On the side of the European Parliament, a standing rapporteur was appointed to inform the EP of progress made in PCD. The Consensus serves as an acknowledgement of civil society criticism but limits this criticism by confining it to the discursive and institutional elements within the ECD. Moreover, because these limited measures cannot reasonably remedy capitalism's contradictions, the Commission's approach to Coherence creates

its own necessity to subsist, forcing other actors in the development sphere to board the Coherence bandwagon. With the European Consensus on Development, the Commission seemingly navigates between its (limited but necessary) capacity to face its critics and its inability to escape its position as a capitalist in a (fragmentary) global system.

**Figure 6:** Phase 1 semiosis



In sum, the emergent but fragmentary structure of global capitalism allowed for the activation of several semiotic processes (summarized in Figure 6). Under its inherent contradictions, space has existed for dissenting agency to voice their (fundamental) criticism. Prominent examples are the NIEO in the 1970s and 1980s and the alter-globalization campaigns of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Although in both occasions, the goal to fundamentally transform capitalist relations of production in the emerging world order was unsuccessful, they did accomplish a subtler feat. The campaigns in their respective rights shifted the connotation of Coherence to an increasingly problematic nature. Hereby, they constrained capitalism's champions to a reluctant acknowledgement that incoherent and/or contradicting external policies ought to be addressed. In the case of the NIEO, this materialized in the generally favorable conditions in the Lomé conventions for the Global South. In the case of the alter-globalization campaigns, it was the more abstract discursive selective that all policy areas are interlinked and not Coherent by default. At the same time, both in the case of the NIEO and the

Lomé conventions, Northern concessions ultimately eroded over time, casting rightful doubts over the idea of Coherence as a transformative redefinition of North-South relations.

In fact, the success in civil society campaigns notwithstanding, their efforts have come at a semiotic price. Although the Coherence speech act has provided critical voices with a device to criticize the Commission's ambivalent attitude towards developing countries, the nature of Coherence as both a discourse and as an (emergent) social practice impedes the possibility to discuss EU external policy at the margins of the semiotic spectrum. Defining EU external policy as either Coherent by default or as impossible to be Coherent with the interests of developing countries should hereby become less common. On the one hand, Coherence as defined in the Maastricht Treaty and re-iterated in the ECD forms a tacit admission by elites that full liberalization is not a viable long-term strategy for developing countries, necessitating a softer approach that smoothens out incoherencies between the various policy-areas. On the other hand, civil society agents will find it very difficult to leverage fundamental criticism against European development policy, and its external policy at large, when the fundamental assumption is made that coherence should be achieved without radically departing from market-led principles of economic liberalization. Therefore, the ECD should – guided by semiosis – present a full shift to the center connotations of Coherence; a framework that presents coherence as neither something that is achieved by default, nor as something that is impossible. Thereby, we have gone from illocutionary enablement to illocutionary entanglement.

#### *4.2. Policy coherence as a semiotic machine*

This section analyzes the actualization of the three mechanisms of semiosis between 2005 and 2015. The start of this phase is marked by the emergence of a European Consensus on Development. As outlined above, the Consensus is an illocutionary entanglement because it impedes all actors from radical departures of the semiotic center. Three developments are central to this phase. First, the way in which agents beyond the European Commission have positioned themselves within the discursive framework of Coherence. Second, what the growing competences of the Commission in shaping European external policy mean for its ability to coheritize EU external policy. Third and finally how the Commission has responded to persistent contradictions in global capitalism.

##### *4.2.1. The 2005 semiotic landscape*

To understand the make-up of the discursive landscape around EU external (development) policy, a useful exercise is to examine the Commission's public consultations. They form a material, discursive, and temporal moment wherein the Commission implicitly or explicitly, purposefully or unbeknownst enables a forced reduction to the set of possible meanings one can attribute to its (developmental) policy (sense-making). At moments where the Commission deems fit, such as with the 2005 European

Consensus on Development, it asks stakeholders for input. Stakeholders can voice their views through carefully prepared questionnaires in which the Commission selects which elements are relevant, how they are framed, and where the emphasis is placed. The 2005 consultation did not have a fixed questionnaire; the only point of reference is an issues paper drafted by DG Development. The paper identifies key trends such as the linkage of trade and development policy (EC, 2005a). On the subject of policy coherence, the document presents a mixture of ‘Coherence by design’ and ‘Coherence as an institutional problem’:

“Development policy is on the same level as the common foreign and security policy and trade policy, and must be articulated consistently with them. By the same token, the other policies must be coherent with development policy” (ibid: 3).

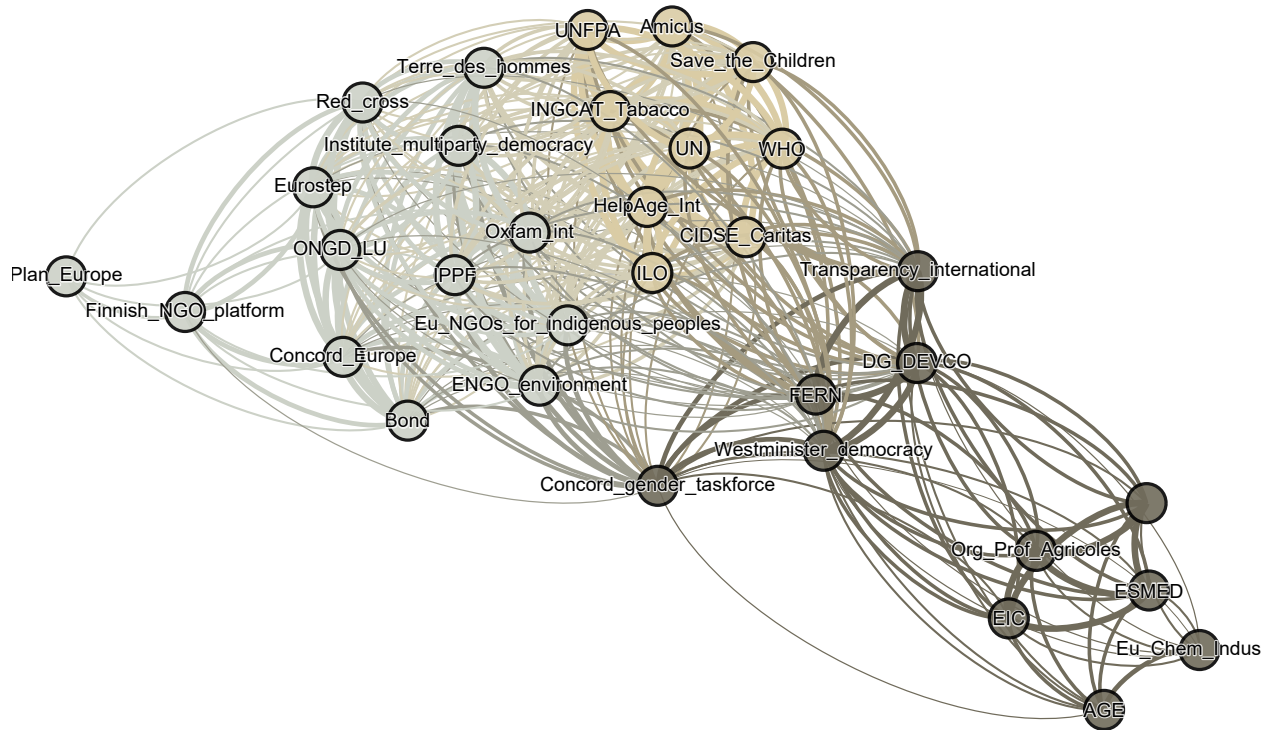
“Trade is a powerful tool to foster economic growth, necessary for achieving development and poverty reduction objectives in developing countries” (ibid: 5).

“The EU is committed to work towards a development friendly and sustainable outcome of trade negotiations. This implies *inter alia* to decrease the level of trade distortive measures such as subsidies to the agricultural sector, in the context of the implementation of the common agriculture policy reform” (ibid: 5, emphasis in original).

As a result of these (rather loose) discursive selectives, contributions from all groups of stakeholders (businesses, academics/experts, Civil Society Organizations, and International Organizations) provide diverse responses of varying length. The results of the 2005 consultation are captured in Figures 7 and 8.

Figure 7 shows us that in 2005, three clusters of agents exist. The ‘light’ cluster at the left top left represents agents more critical of the meaning and possibility for coherence to arise. Many of these agents are in agreement that Coherence constitutes a fundamental problem for industrialized nations (see Figure 2). The beige nodes on the other hand are still somewhat critical rather see incoherencies an instrumental problem. Finally, agents belonging to the dark cluster are more positive and believe that Coherence can be attained through design choices, although some agents ambivalently indicate that it is also more of a problem than an opportunity, hence the spread of agents in this cluster. Figure 8 further unpacks the clusters in the network. The two-mode affiliation network shows the relation between actors and concepts. Clusters in this network have the same color-coding as in the co-occurrence network. We can see that the ‘critical’ agents (e.g., Eurostep) indeed view Coherence as a fundamental problem, but also as an institutional problem. Often, organizations signal problems in our current model of (economic) development as fundamentally flawed, but their solutions are of

**Figure 7:** Co-occurrence network based on 2005 consultation



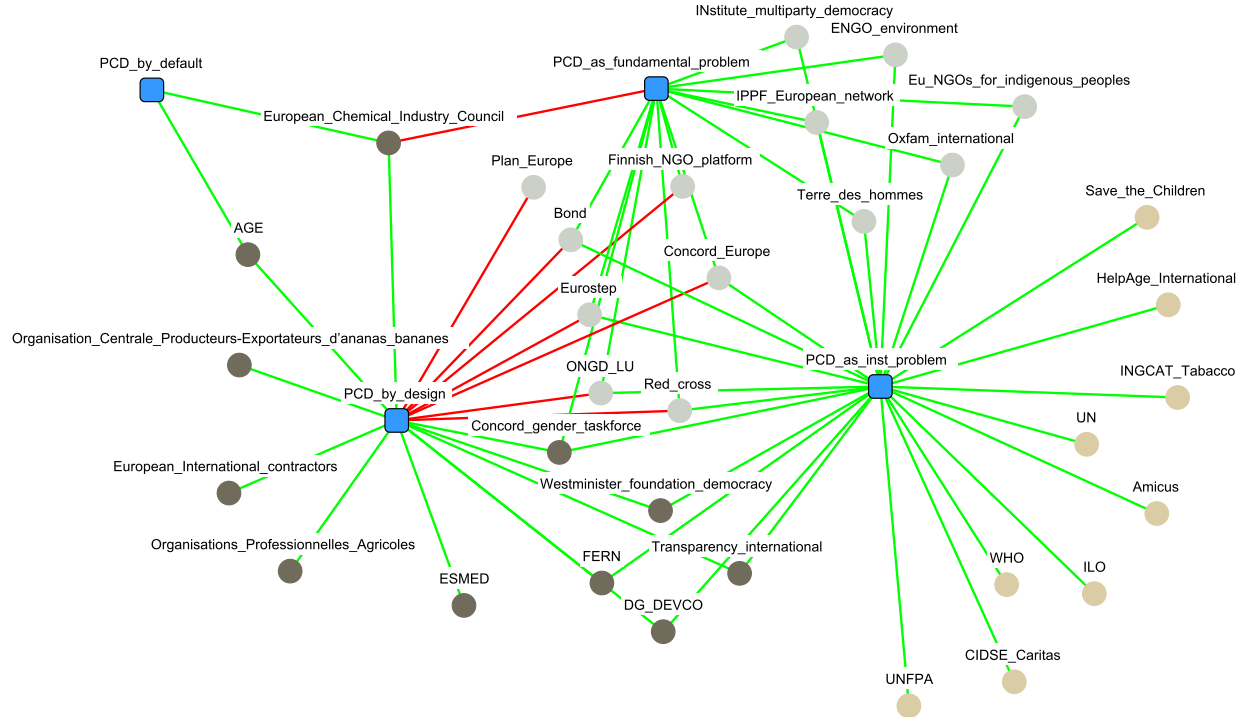
a rather institutional nature. Interestingly, some contributions explicitly denounce the Commission's intent to 'synergize' areas such as aid and trade/security, out of fear that aid policies might be subverted by the former. Therefore, some statements were coded as disagreeing with the Coherence by design connotation.

What these images tell us, in sum, is that in the run-up to the European Consensus on Development, a substantial group of skeptical actors from civil society existed. However, even the most critical agents did not rule out the possibility to reconcile capitalism with broader external policy goals. At the same time, very few actors outright equated development with neoliberal economic development (Coherence by default). This all but confirms the suspicion that the ECD-induced illocutionary entanglement is real. As such, one can expect the discursive and institutional selectives of coherence to act as a semiotic machine that pushes all actors to the semiotic center.

#### *4.2.2. From 2007 onwards: the rise of a permissive Consensus on development*

The first point of entry to analyze the further development of Coherence are the bi-annual reports on PCD released by DG Development. The ECD specified that these are the main indicators of progress made on the PCD agenda. The first report was released in 2007 and maintains the somewhat critical nature of the ECD by 'naming-and-shaming' Member States whose policies exerted the most

**Figure 8:** Affiliation network based on 2005 consultation



egregious incoherencies with development goals (Furness, 2016; EC, 2007). At the same time, the report immediately introduces a semiotic change to our understanding of coherence:

“The European Union (EU) concept of Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) aims to build *synergies* between those policies and development objectives. This in turn will increase the *effectiveness* of development aid” (EC, 2007: 3, emphasis added).

Whereas the original 2005 EDC documentation made no reference to coherence in any other way than the ‘do-no-harm’ approach, this document places the emphasis not on the negative (preventing incoherencies) but on the positive (building synergies). As such, “[PCD] evolved from a criticism against existing practices towards a new organizing narrative for development debates.” (Verschaeve et al, 2016: 50). A key motivation for the Commission to emphasize the positive over the negative is the belief that “we [various DGs] do not have conflicting agendas” (interview 2). It establishes a second key discursive selective in how the debate around development is structured: (2) *the interlinkages between policy-areas do not mutually reinforce each other by default, but can be made so.*

The effects of the discursive selective can be found in subsequent PCD reports that have at most paid lip service to Coherence as an institutional problem and do not contain suggestions for courses of action (EC, 2011; 2013; 2015; Carbone, 2016; Carbone & Keijzer, 2016: 5; Furness & Gänzle, 2017). In fact, post-2005 communications of the EC have become smaller in ambition and more

procedural and technocratic in nature (see also Carbonne, 2016a: 15). The initial 2005 ECD communication spoke of aid as: “[r]educing and eventually eradicating poverty is identified as the main objective of development cooperation.” (EC, 2005a: 3). In contrast, the 2015 report on PCD never actually explains why the EU should pursue PCD, other than to say that it is a legal and political commitment (EC, 2015: 17). This way of communicating obscures the fundamental political nature of providing a coherent framework for external policies. The post-2007 PCD reports (2009-2015) were ‘demoted’ to staff working papers. Even though this has on account been interpreted as the failure of PCD (Carbonne, 2016a: 15), following the logic of the semiotic cycle, the opposite is true, as it is actually an indication of perlocutionary success. We would expect the initial grand, all-encompassing ideas to subsequently trickle down onto the desks of ordinary staff within the Commission if the speech act is successful. However, based on their own position and preferences, agents will fill structures with (partially) idiosyncratic interpretations of coherence. As such, we should expect the meaning of coherence to be structure-bound but also open to semiotic entrepreneurship through agential selectives.

The way forward indeed entails a gradual increase in focus on the more positive ‘synergetic’ side of coherence; Coherence by design (EC, 2011; 2013; 2015; Verschaeve et al, 2016). The ambivalent attitude of the Commission taken is also reflected by the mechanisms in place to promote coherence. Fundamentally, one can focus on either coherent outcomes and/or processes (Carbonne & Keijzer, 2016: 33-34; Siitonen, 2016: 2-4). The Commission’s approach towards coherence is decidedly one that favors processes over outcome (Carbonne & Keijzer, 2016: 3). The main tools for promoting coherence are Impact Assessments (IAs). In lieu of *ex post* reviews on actual performance, coherence is promoted through *ex ante* commitments. It has been argued that so far, these assessments have made it difficult to measure the actual external effect of EU policies on developing countries, since there is no clear baseline to use as a benchmark (ibid: 5). Moreover, this New Public Management-like approach is criticized for its de-politicizing effect on issues that are “inherently political” (ibid.). Additionally, IAs are criticized for their quantitative and reductionist nature that does not properly capture all economic and non-economic effects<sup>12</sup> (Bartels, 2016: 10; De Ville & Siles-Brügge, 2015: 69-70). Additionally, although IAs in theory assess all EU external policy initiatives for PCD, in practice they fall far short (interview 1). Such reductionist and de-politicizing tools cut off the semiotic tails of the debate because they present coherence as a technicality, thereby impeding fundamental deviance on either side of the spectrum.

By 2012, these exclusionary effects should be discursively visible in the consultation on a post-

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<sup>12</sup>For instance, an EU IA on a recent FTA with India did not take into account the effects on 92 percent of the Indian population because the current methodology cannot capture the countries’ large informal sector (European Economic and Social Committee, 2011).

2015 agenda for development. In contrast to 2005, the set of possible answers is limited due to a fixed questionnaire. Moreover, the explanation for the questions is cut short compared to 2005. At the same time, their formulation still leaves space for fundamental reflection:

“In your view, what should be the primary purpose of a future framework?”

“To what extent should a future framework focus on the poorest and most fragile countries, or also address development objectives relevant in other countries?”

“What do you consider to be the ”top 3” features or elements which must be *avoided* in any future development agenda?” (emphasis in original).

However, such openness is not present for every question:

*How* could a new development agenda involve new actors, including the *private sector* and emerging donors? (emphasis added).

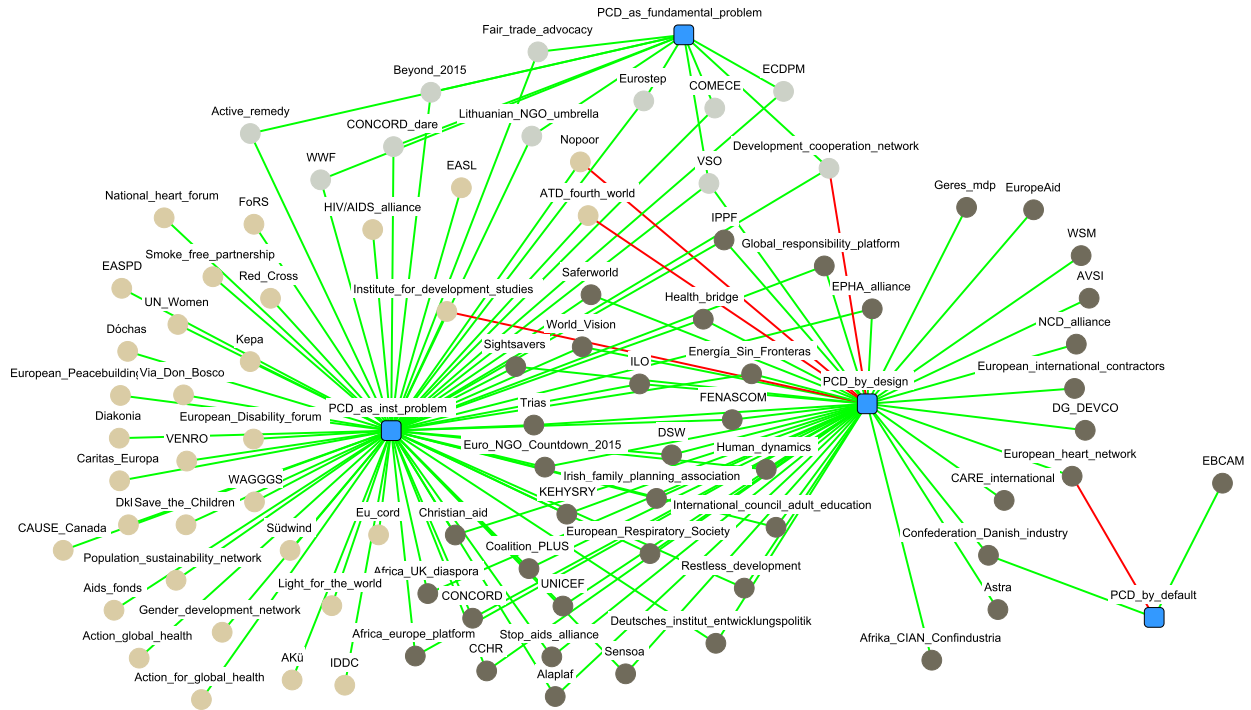
Significantly, the Commission here does not ask if private actors *should* be involved, but instead *how* they can be involved. The careful formulation of other questions arguably shows that this is not by accident. Thus, although the consultation leaves plenty of space for fundamental criticism, important discursive selectives regarding the necessity to involve other actors – serving as a proxy for promoting ‘Coherence by design’ – are put in place.

Figure 9 shows the discourse network of 2012. A few striking features immediately stand out. First, the number of actors in the network has dramatically increased. This is explained by the fact that NGOs are often part of umbrella organizations such as CONCORD Europe, but still hand in an individual reply, thereby increasing the number of nodes. Second, we can see that the three groups (critical, ‘mainstream’, and positive) are still present, but in a slightly altered configuration. Importantly, the network now revolves around a core of two groups each flanked by another subgroup. The two large clusters represent agents who predominantly refer to Coherence as an institutional problem or as a matter of design. The more outspoken positions, Coherence by default, or Coherence as a fundamental problem, are relegated to relatively minor (sub) clusters. It is in the ‘middle’ classifications of Coherence that are central to the network; the flanking clusters have not increased much in size, even though a substantial number of additional organizations have contributed compared to 2005. As such, this network provides good support for the previously discussed shift to the semiotic center.

The affiliation network (Figure 10) further shows how the increase in actors (both in absolute and relative terms) that now define Coherence as a design matter. Furthermore, it shows how the number

When reviewing the substantive nature of the contributions more closely, it becomes visible that the discursive and institutional selectives of the Coherence speech act affect participation mechanisms and the position and participation chances of civil society organizations. Since 2005, their role in accepting, criticizing, and promoting (in)coherence has become increasingly ambivalent. Fundamentally, many NGOs have accepted discursive selective (1): all policies are interlinked, and their criticisms are framed with this in mind. This is especially apparent in their contributions to the 2012 consultation, where many organizations criticize the MDGs for their ‘siloe’d’ approach, i.e., their sequestered nature in relation to other goals (e.g., World Wide Fund, 2012: 4; EuroNGOs & Countdown Europe, 2012: 3). Moreover, their critique on EU external policy and effectiveness of aid policies is usually framed in terms of attaining PCD (CONCORD, 2009). On the other hand, many CSOs have been less accepting of (2): the idea that incoherent policies can be made coherent by design. For instance, CONCORD (2011) calls for a complaints mechanism to address incoherencies. Eurostep, meanwhile, goes further by arguing that without fundamental reform to non-aid areas such as trade and intellectual property rights, achieving Coherence is impossible (Eurostep, 2012: 4). However, on a more abstract level many reports from civil society fail to make a cohesive mark. Oftentimes,

**Figure 10:** Affiliation network based on 2012 consultation



organizations exert scathing criticism on the contradictory and exploitative nature of global capitalism, only to promptly contradict themselves by calling for solutions that embrace mechanisms that promote those very same inequalities (see for instance EuroNGOs, 2016; CONCORD Europe, 2016).

The Commission meanwhile characterizes the relation between itself and civil society as symbiotic: “we need each other” (interview 1). Because of CSO’s generally more critical approach, they show points where the Commission can acuminate its (instrumental) approach to coherence. Civil society organizations themselves meanwhile perceive PCD as an important frame of reference that they can use to read the Commisison’s policy output against the grain (interview 3). As such, the incentive is to go along with the discursive and institutional boundaries as defined by the Commission. This material reality of mutual dependency thereby strengthens the already on-going semiotic transformation away from fundamental criticism against the inherent contradictions arising out of EU external policy.

In conclusion, post-2012 the transformation of Coherence from a speech act to a social practice has given rise to a ‘permissive consensus’ (Down & Wilson, 2008). Strictly speaking, fundamental (but not radical) criticism under the discursive selectives (all policies are interlinked and can be made Coherent by design) and institutional selectives (IAs, public consultations) surrounding EU external policy remains possible. However, the entire discursive and institutional structure dissuades agents from these trajectories, as apparent by the 2012 discourse network which shows a (relative) decrease in both critical and pro-market voices.

#### 4.2.3. *Persistent contradictions*

The 2012 consultation and its run-up does not tell the full story. To understand the events after 2015, it is imperative to analyze the Commission's position in the global capitalist system. In particular, the years 2008-2009 mark a crucial turning point for several reasons outlined in the next paragraphs. Fundamentally, these turning points should be understood as variegated reactions of the Commission to threats against its accumulation regime from both the inside and outside. At the center stands the global financial crisis, which has put Northern political-economic hegemony in jeopardy.

In parallel and prior to the global financial crisis, European elites have increasingly sought to transform the EU into a global actor that consolidates its financial and productive hegemony (Orbie, 2012; Ryner & Cafruny, 2016: 206-217). Imperative in furthering that goal is to speak with one voice; to have coherent external policies. In this light, the 2009 Lisbon Treaty expanded Article 130V to the entire extent of external policy (Carbonne, 2008: 324). As such, the goal of attaining coherence also became an intergovernmental issue. This allowed for PCD's profile to be raised further, but it also opened it up for semiotic change (see below). After the Lisbon Treaty, the twelve original focal areas for PCD were consolidated into five: trade and finance, climate change, food security, migration, and security (Council of the European Union, 2009). This allowed for a more focused approach on behalf of the Commission. Additionally, the Lisbon Treaty brought reforms to the organization of the EC itself. DG Development and EuropeAid merged to form DG DEVCO (Development and Cooperation). Beyond the realm of development aid, the semiotic redefinition of coherence vis-à-vis less industrialized countries is also reflected in the Commission's approach to trading with ACP nations. The Lisbon Treaty confers competence for trade relations with ACP nations from DG DEVCO to DG Trade (Furness, 2012). This matters because within the Commission, debates exist on how to tackle development, with DG Trade more explicitly equating market-led economic growth with development (Negre, 2013; De Ville & Orbie, 2013; Carbonne & Keijzer, 2016).

Since development policy is always vulnerable of capture by greater interests (Carbonne, 2008: 330), the danger of such a comprehensive approach is that the overall attitude towards coherence is increasingly one of coherence by design. This is exemplified by DG Trade's post-Lisbon approach towards negotiating trade deals with less industrialized countries (EPAs for ACP nations and a revised GSP for other nations). Whereas trade relations under the Lomé Convention were characterized by non-reciprocity – Coherence as an institutional problem – the EPAs are reciprocal and Coherent by design (Ryner & Cafruny, 2016: 197-199). Both the EPAs and the reformed GSP are aimed at increasing the EU's leverage over developing countries with a strong export-driven imperative (Heron & Siles-Brügge 2012, Siles-Brügge, 2014). Another conflict between development and non-development interests is Lisbon Treaty's approach to security (Furness & Gänzle, 2017). The

2005 ECD already contains strong suggestions of linking aid with security (EC, 2005a), and this push was accelerated by Member States such as France and Eastern European countries. They see development policy more as a function of their security policy (Orbie, 2012: 27; Thede, 2013), potentially subjugating development to security interests (Thede, 2013; Grävingholt, 2016).

Beyond these internal struggles, another layer of contestation comes from the Global South. Capitalism's increasingly transnational scope poses a contradiction: on the one hand, the capacity to find new circuits of accumulation greatly expands as it is freed from most spatial constraints (Jessop & Sum, 2018: 217-218). On the other hand, this greatly increases the tendency for uneven and unstable development trajectories (ibid.). Of course, this mechanism is hardly manifest of a new phenomenon but rather exacerbates existing features of global capitalism. Nevertheless, the massive post-2008 influx of credit into the global financial system and the concomitant deregulation of financial markets have placed increasing scrutiny on the (post)Washington Consensus model of market-led economic growth in the Global South (Marois & Pradella, 2015; Patomäki, 2012). In particular, EU attempts to revive its financialization-driven model of accumulation through quantitative easing aggravated Southern countries' position because the resulting devaluation of the Euro undermined their ability to compete with European producers (Maris & Pradella, 2015: 6; Akyüz & Yu, 2017). At the same time, major rising centers of accumulation such as Brazil and China survived the 2008-2009 crisis relatively unscathed and have since introduced credible alternatives to the Northern model (Breslin, 2011; Perrone & César, 2015; Ryner & Cafruny, 2016: 208-210). China's One Belt One Road Initiative and its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and Brazil's National Export Plan that focuses specifically on South-South relations (Trubek et al, 2017) show that alternatives to the Northern model are possible. This puts European policy-makers in an awkward position, because the increasing European desire to become a more global actor is jeopardized by the rise of credible alternatives to EU development policy – especially with increasing criticism towards the incoherence of its internal and external policies with interests of the South.

The European answer to the increasingly contested status of Northern/Atlantic hegemony is the partial departure from multilateral WTO-led trajectories towards 'megaregional' treaties such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP<sup>13</sup>). In the context of EU-South relationships, TTIP presents a major impact as makes EU firms more competitive vis-à-vis Southern firms because of access to cheaper US intermediary goods (Ryner & Cafruny, 2016: 215). This enhanced EU competitiveness in turn makes it harder for industrializing countries to pursue development because it puts

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<sup>13</sup>Of course, the current political context makes it anything but certain that the TTIP will in fact be concluded. However, the broader motivation still speaks true to the narrative as provided here. Moreover, the Trade in Services Agreement is still under negotiation and arguably impacts North-South relations even more (Kelsey, 2016).

downward pressures on labor standards and environmental preservation (O'Donoghue & Tzouvala, 2016; Bello, 2015: 11). Thereby, one side of EU external policy – motivated by internal and external pressures against its accumulation regime – undercuts its external development policy, especially in light of the ambition towards being coherent with broader goals such as human rights, labor rights, and environmental standards. Although the connotation of the signifier 'development' as neoliberal development (Coherence by design) may not be challenged, the promotion of PCD certainly speaks to a reality where discursively constrained agents have to speak out in alternate ways that do not directly challenge the discursive hegemony. Indeed, "the fact that it [PCD] comes up means that it was necessary" (interview 2). This last observation is strengthened by the fact that even before the global financial crisis of 2007 and the subsequent sovereign debt crises hit the EU, the entire concept of development aid has come under attack (see, for example: Sachs, 2006; Easterly, 2006; Moyo, 2009; Sianes, 2017: 135). As such, the advent of policy coherence on the political agenda should also be seen as an attempt to provide a more positive and *effective* connotation to EU development policy (OECD, 2009; Deutscher, 2010).

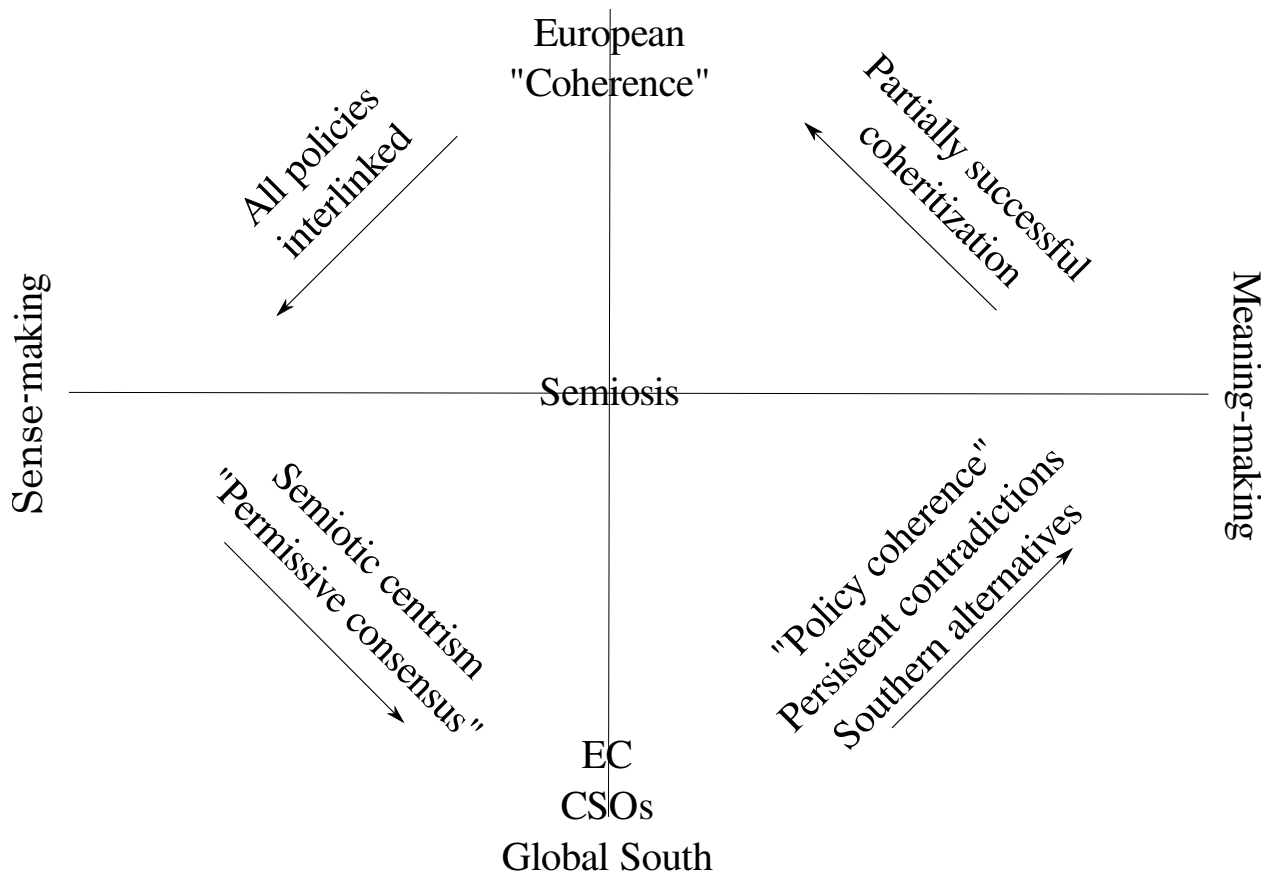
Beyond delegitimation, EU external (development) policy is also threatened by an ecological conundrum. Abject poverty can – from a Western perspective – lead to encroachments upon nature through deforestation, clearing land for cultivation and by the killing of animals (Sing, 2011: 6). Unfortunately, seeking recourse towards lifting people out of poverty by successfully industrializing less developed economies does not save nature. Successful industrialization goes hand in hand with higher levels of production and consumption (ibid; Merchant, 2005: 9). Higher output in turn bears an increased ecological footprint (Brand & Wissen, 2018: 2). As peripheral economies successfully industrialize – partially as a result of EU development policy – the very same EU policies will have also contributed to unsustainable trajectories of growth. Since the ecological side of development has become a crucial part of the Agenda 2030, the fact that capitalism is put at odds with environmental sustainability poses an additional contradictory reality for a coherent EU external policy.

All of the abovementioned elements combined lead to a fundamental challenge in reconciling contradicting interests both intra-EU and with developing countries. Perhaps this explains the ambiguity in how coherence is framed as both a critique against and embracement of existing capitalist practices, and simultaneously as a tool for transformative development. We can slowly start to draw the illocutionary act of the Commission's Coherence speech act: *(3) to overcome resistance against the EC's accumulation regime from all sides, synergies between aid and non-aid areas should be found through a combination of coordination, ex-ante impact assessments, and consultation of stakeholders.*

More broadly, one can now see how we have gone from coherence as a narrowly defined discursive practice to improve the effectiveness of aid, towards coheritization, a broad social practice that asks

all policy areas to be coherent with one another – both positively and negatively. Coheritization tacitly admits that incoherencies are possible, but fends off fundamental criticism because it already defines the relation between the EU and less industrialized countries as one that is coherent to some extent from the outset. At the same time, the fact that capitalism's contradictions cannot be resolved through coherence remains a fundamental roadblock in achieving full coheritization, as demonstrated by the 2012 consultation where limited clusters of civil society resistance remain visible.

**Figure 11:** Phase 2 semiosis



More broadly, one can now see how we have gone from *coherence* as a narrowly defined *discursive* practice to improve the effectiveness of aid, towards *coheritization*, a broad *social* practice that asks all policy areas to be coherent with one another – both positively and negatively. Coheritization tacitly admits that incoherencies are possible, but fends off fundamental criticism because it already defines the relation between the EU and less industrialized countries as one that is coherent to some extent from the outset. At the same time, the fact that capitalism's contradictions cannot be resolved through coherence remains a fundamental roadblock in achieving full coheritization, as demonstrated by the 2012 consultation where limited clusters of civil society resistance remain visible.

In sum, the second phase of coherence should be seen as the time where the mechanisms around

semiosis have transformed the speech act of Coherence into a global speech act of Coheritization (see Figure 11). This latter speech act has functioned as a “permissive consensus”, because although the boundaries of what is semiotically permeable are firmly defined by the Commission, the bandwidth within these boundaries still permeates a wide range of critique. This is not unproblematic for the Commission. In fact, it has become highly problematic in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, which has shown that in spite of Commission-led efforts to coheritize EU external policy, capitalism’s contradictions persist. This, in turn, activates a necessary condition for the third and final mechanism of Coherence to actualize.

#### *4.3. Coherence as a permanent counter-revolution?*

The final phase towards coheritization (2015-now) marks the moment where it has become clear that Coherence is a useful tool for co-opting criticism and excluding critical voices from the discursive playing field, but less effective to stabilize capitalism’s contradictions. Therefore, the only viable option seemingly for the Commission is to spread the existing system of contradictions globally.

##### *4.3.1. The SDGs: spreading coheritization?*

Similar to Trotsky’s (1931) reading of Marxism, national and regional capitalist contradictions are only expressions of global contradictions. Consequently, the Commission’s inability to overcome regional contradictions necessitates a global approach for policy coherence. At the global level, certainly the most important development that has taken place in the development sphere is the adoption of the Agenda 2030 and with it, the Sustainable Development Goals. As a successor to the MDGs, the SDGs will for the next fifteen years shape the global developmental agenda. One of the most striking features about the SDGs is their emphasis on interlinkages between different policy areas. Indeed, from the outset sustainable development is seen as only achievable by addressing the interlinkages between its ecological, economic, and social dimensions (UN, 2015: 6). On first sight, the emphasis on interlinkages indicates that the principles of coheritization have spread to the global stage. As such, the goal of this subsection will be twofold. First, to analyze what extent to which the SDGs really exhibit coheritizing properties. Second, to explore the extent to which the EC has plausibly acted as a catalyst for coheritizing the SDGs.

To explore the first part, we should briefly revisit the core tenets of coheritization. Coheritization as a whole can be divided up different speech acts. To see if coheritization is present at all, it does not require the most stringent test that sees if all three acts have occurred. Rather, we can focus on the necessary conditions without which there can be no coheritization, the locutionary acts (1): all policies are interlinked, and (2): these policy areas do not mutually reinforce themselves by default, but can be made so. The first order of business is to analyze how the United Nations (UN) presents

its view on the SDGs. The report on the adoption of the SDGs has this to say: “The interlinkages and integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals are of crucial importance in ensuring that the purpose of the new Agenda is realized.” (UN, 2015a: 6). The primacy of how interlinked the SDGs are is re-iterated in several speeches by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon: “The new framework does not just add goals. It weaves the goals together, with human rights, the rule of law and women’s empowerment as crucial parts of an integrated whole” (UN, 2015b). Thus, the idea that all dimensions of development (social, ecological, and economical) are interlinked – the first speech act – is unequivocally present in the SDGs.

The next question is whether the SDGs embrace the idea of Coherence by design. A positive answer to this question would form a strong indication that the second locutionary act is also present. To this end, the most important question is to closely review the process through which the SDGs will be implemented. Goal 17 – partnerships for the goals – is of particular importance. It contains a strong emphasis on public-private partnerships (PPPs) as a way to finance and implement the SDGs (UN, 2018). In terms of financing, the SDGs contain explicit references to neoliberal structures of global investment:

17.3: Mobilize additional financial resources for developing countries from multiple sources  
17.3.1: Foreign direct investments (FDI), official development assistance and South-South Cooperation as a proportion of total domestic budget

17.10: Promote a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system under the World Trade Organization, including through the conclusion of negotiations under the Doha Development Agenda.

The explicit reference to FDI and the WTO-framework exhibits a deep commitment to commercialized principles being equated with development. Through its General Agreement on Trade in Services and the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights, the WTO asks for the liberalization of public and financial services. It also provides stringent rules on intellectual property rights that inhibit development (Weber, 2017; Hunter Wade, 2003). At the same time, the goals and indicators do not fundamentally scrutinize the detrimental social and ecological effects of neoliberalized trade and investment, ruling out the possibility of Coherence as impossibility or a fundamental problem. However, Coherence by default is also ruled out as evidenced by the following set of goals:

17.14: Enhance policy coherence for sustainable development;  
17.14.1 Number of countries with mechanisms in place to enhance policy coherence of sustainable development

17.16: Enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals in all countries, in particular developing countries

17.17: Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships

These goals shed light on the SDG's vision towards PCD/PCSD. First and foremost because PCSD is seen as a goal in itself, confirming the notion that it is not present or at least fully exploited by default. Second, the goals suggest that (unspecified) mechanisms should be put in place to fully enable PCSD. In other words: synergies between the three dimensions of sustainable development can only be exploited after coordinating efforts of all actors. Goals 17.16 and 17.17 show the full scope of actors involved in the process of attaining PCSD. In the words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres: “[w]e need policy makers and central banks, stock exchanges, pension funds, rating agencies and all financial actors to align investments with the needs of climate action and sustainable development” (UN, 2017). A global, public-private and multi-stakeholder approach to achieve PCSD fully embraces the idea that it can be attained by design because it obscures contradicting agendas and harmful power asymmetries inimical to development but inherent to such partnerships while at the same time overstating the potential gains (see also Gleckman, 2016; Gladkova, 2017). In sum, this approach corroborates the presence of coheritization's second element: the idea that inherently interlinked policy areas are not coherent by default, but can be made so. Consequently, the SDGs exhibit coheritizing properties as they are redolent of its locutionary acts.

How does the Commission enter into the fray as a possible coheritizer of the SDGs? The process of forming them was a complex and convoluted amalgam of actors, processes, and events (UN Foundation, 2015), although the EU undoubtedly played a major role in their formation. To this end, it is useful to examine the 2016 consultation on how to implement the SDGs into EU external (development) policy. Concurrent with the expectation that we should have gone from coherence to coheritization, little space was possible for anything but acknowledgement that Coherence is something to be attained through design choices. DG DEVCO in its green paper addressed to the Parliament and Council and based on the consultation states it more clearly than anyone else:

“The EU and its Member States will coordinate development cooperation programs with trade policy tools in support of the implementation of the provisions in trade agreements relating to trade and sustainable development. They will combine the skills and resources of the private sector with supportive trade policies and instruments, Aid for Trade and economic

diplomacy, which will promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth and help third countries adopt growth models that take account of resource scarcity and climate change action” (EC, 2016: 14).

“The EU and its Member States will also contribute to scaling-up private and public investments in low-carbon, climate-resilient green economy. They will seek to contribute to improving resource efficiency, decoupling growth from environmental degradation, promoting sustainable consumption and production and reducing vulnerabilities. Investments will be undertaken in partnership with local enterprises and actors and in respect of land rights and labor rights” (EC, 2016: 15).

Differently put: the totality of all policies is a global public goods affair, and in the design of our policies we can take advantage of the many synergies awaiting to be exploited. *Everything* must be coherent with *everything*, and this is possible through a number of ex-ante and ex-post tools that incentivize the design of our policies towards these ends.

In contrast to the 2005 and 2012 consultations, the 2016 consultation is based on a fixed questionnaire of (semi) closed questions, such as:

How should the EU strengthen the balanced integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in its internal and external policies, and in particular in its development policy?

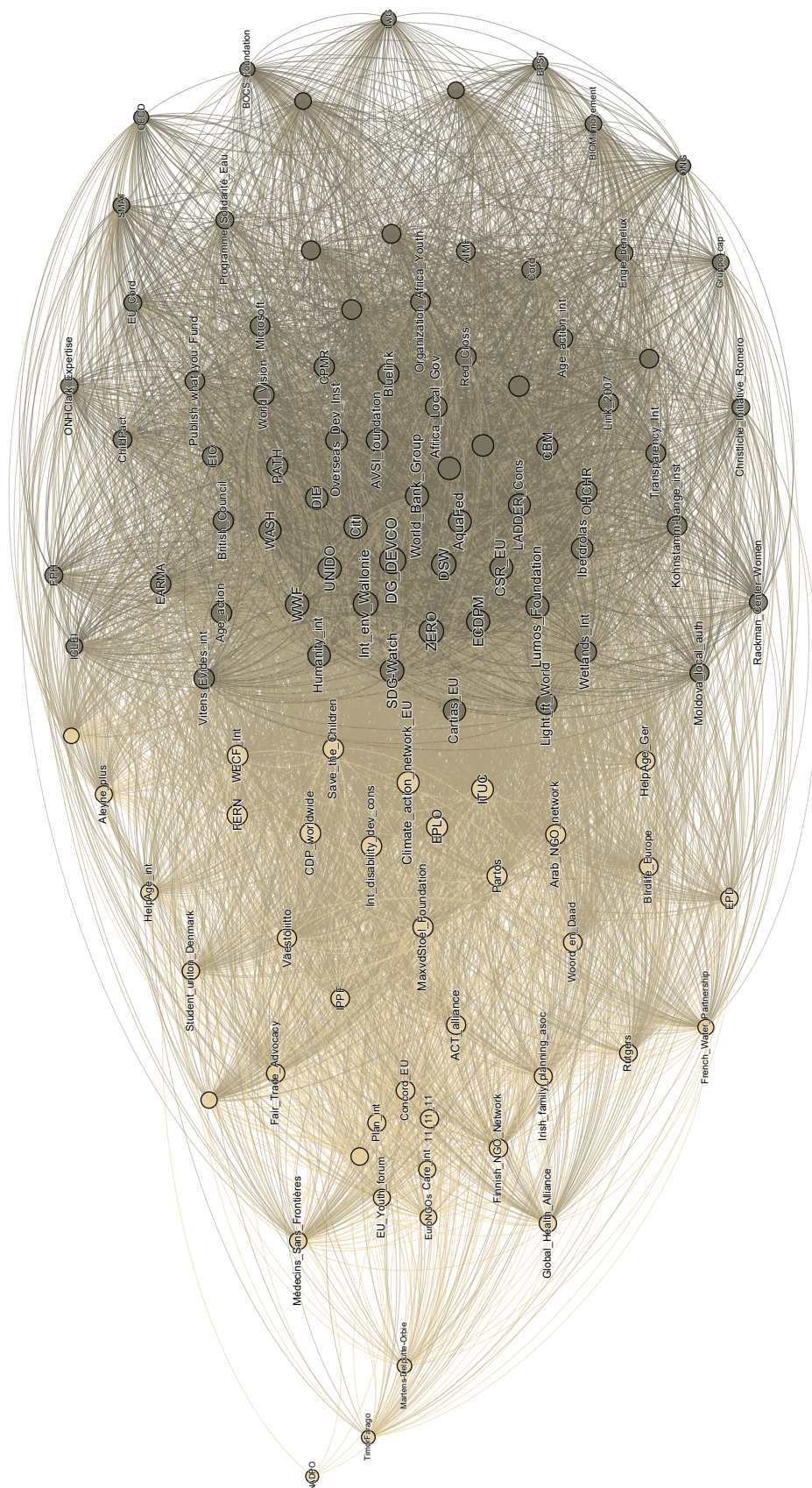
How can EU policies, and EU development policy in particular, help to mobilize and maximize the impact of the increasing variety of sustainable development finance, including in particular from the private sector?

How can we help ensure that policies in developing countries, and internationally contribute coherently to sustainable development priorities?

How can the EU promote private sector investment for sustainable development?

The results of coding all the replies (Figure 12) provide a clear image of how the discourse network has evolved. For the first time, there are only two clusters rather than three. The biggest cluster is now the positive ‘dark’ cluster, which is made up of actors who predominantly perceive Coherence as a design opportunity (Figure 13). The beige cluster is still made up of actors who see Coherence as an institutional challenge. It is less homogenous and rather consists of various subgroups based on their

**Figure 12:** Co-occurrence network based on 2016 consultation



propensity to see Coherence as an institutional problem rather than a design opportunity. Very few actors in the 2016 consultation outright referred to Coherence as a fundamental problem, and instead rather disagreed that it is achieved by default. The difference is that for it to be a fundamental problem, one should indicate that industrialized countries need to make deep reforms to their internal and external policies, but actors rather only stated that the current economic system does not automatically lead to development.

**Figure 13:** Affiliation network based on 2016 consultation

A similar depolarization occurred in the design-cluster, where fewer actors agreed with the concept of Coherence by default. As such, the road towards the semiotic center has continued from 2012 by further depolarizing the discourse around development and coherence. However, there is no complete co-optation, nor is it entirely one-sided. As visible in Figure 13, many NGOs still offer a perspective that is distinct and removed from the pro-design cluster. That being said, their perspectives have coalesced into a discourse that is less fundamental in its critique. At the same time, co-optation has also occurred on the pro-market side, since fewer actors agree that Coherence is actually the default status of our economic system. As such, the most optimistic actors have also adjusted their understanding of coherence towards the semiotic center. On a theoretical level, this serves as an effective illustration of the idea that (discursive) selectives are agnostic as regards to whom they enable and constrain. Rather, they are the underlying mechanisms that structure the entire playing field, instead of being mere tools for capitalist domination.

element in the 2012 consultation was an evaluation of the MDGs. Several questions were dedicated to explore the major drawbacks and advantages of the MDG-framework. Although most actors complimented the clarity of the MDGs in their goal of poverty-reduction, many also lamented their rather narrow focus and their ‘siloed’ nature. Indeed, one of the most common criticisms was the lack of interlinkages found in the MDGs (United Nations Economic and Social Committee, 2016; Adams & Judd, 2016). This is strongly reminiscent of coheritization’s first locutionary act. However, back in 2012 there was still a substantial majority of actors who saw Coherence as an institutional problem rather than as a design opportunity. This is exemplified by Table 1. Here, one can see how the distribution of actors agreeing with the various Coherence statements has shifted over the years. Crucially, the widespread acceptance of Coherence by design only occurred in 2016, not 2012. This shows that coheritization did not spread to civil society organizations until *after* the adoption of the SDGs. At the same time, whereas the 2005 communication of the EC still contains statements coded as Coherence as an institutional problem, the subsequent 2012 and 2016 reports only referred to Coherence by design. Thus, at least up until 2016, a discrepancy existed between how the Commission presents coherence and how civil society actors define it.

**Table 1:** Distribution of Coherence statements

Year	Coherence as fundamental problem	Coherence as institutional problem	Coherence by design	Coherence by default
2005	18,49	52,73	23,97	4,79
2012	6,86	64,29	28,00	0,86
2016	0,86	33,48	65,13	0,55

*Numbers in percentages, rounded to two decimals*

The lack of civil society support for coheritization (indicated by support of Coherence by design) shows how widespread acceptance of the coheritization speech act could not have ensued sooner than 2012. As such, it was the Commission who took the lead into spreading coheritization on the EU level, but was not successful in doing so prior to the adoption of the SDGs. At the same time, the Commission conclusions to the 2012 consultation on a post-2015 agenda make clear its intent to spread coheritization globally: “Beyond aid, Policy Coherence for Development plays a major role in eliminating poverty and achieving sustainable development. Strong consideration of the role of these policies should therefore be given due place in the future [SDG] framework” (EC 2012: 14). More-

over, the EU has been a frontrunner in the push to include policy coherence in the SDGs (interview 2). As such, it is clear that the Commission has *attempted* to spread coheritization transnationally. What cannot be concluded on the basis of the available evidence is the extent to which the European position was the *decisive* factor in spreading coheritization. However, the temporality in the European discourse on development certainly points to a Commission-led initiative.

#### 4.3.2. 2017 onwards: towards a constraining Consensus

The adoption of the SDGs and their endorsement of coheritization in turn impacted EU development policy, materializing in 2017 with the adoption of a revised European Consensus on Development. The new Consensus notes that: “The Consensus will guide efforts in applying PCD across all policies and all areas covered by the Agenda 2030, seeking *synergies*, notably on trade, finance, environment and climate change, food security, migration and security.” (Council of the European Union, 2017: 52, emphasis added). This is an extremely broad reformulation of the synergies-approach that coheretizes almost all external policy. In addition to this, policy coherence for development is redefined to policy coherence for *sustainable* development. This de-emphasizes the importance of coherence for developing countries (interview 3), while further reflecting the movement from development cooperation as a North-South affair to a delineated public-private, multi stakeholder affair. The Consensus also regards development primarily as an issue of governance (ibid). On how to achieve PCSD, the document notes: “consultations, stakeholder engagement, ex-ante impact assessments and ex-post evaluations of major policy initiatives” (ibid: 25), thereby reproducing the already existing technocratic approach to coherence. The discursive and institutional shifts present the *perlocutionary* act of the coheritization speech act: *(4) taking 1-3 in mind, speaking of Coherence by default or as fundamental/impossible challenges in itself becomes impossible.*

From the preceding material we can see how the Commission produced not one speech act on coherence, but rather a multifaceted series of speech acts that ultimately coalesced into coheritization. Importantly, the EC’s speech acts affected and were and affected by speech acts of other actors including civil society organizations and Southern agency. The first speech act, The Maastricht Treaty, was – in line with the first proposition – born out of a mixture of contradicting interests within development and non-development minded agents, as well as fundamental changes to global capitalism. As such, policy coherence was a way for development-minded agencies to continue their relevance in a post-communist world. However, the ambitious attempt at redefining the philosophy behind and practices of development was met with a combination of disinterest and resistance from Member States. It was civil society organizations that kept coherence alive in the 1990s. At the same time, the initial speech act paved the way for the second. The Maastricht Treaty introduced the discursive selective that defines external relations not only as interlinked but as existing on a continuum from

incoherent to coherent; a way to approach external relations. This gradual change in the semiotic landscape – combined with global ‘alter-globalization’ campaigns that pointed out the contradictory and incoherent nature of EU external policy – ultimately allowed for a second attempt to promote policy coherence in the ECD (2005). In line with the second proposition, this attempt was more illocutionary constraining because it excluded the most radically dissenting views from debate. Consequently, the discourse around EU development policy started to shift and by the time of the third speech act (the 2012 consultation on a post-2015 agenda), the semiotic tails of the debate were cut off. Unfortunately for the Commission, the social praxis of Coherence was not sufficient to remedy capitalism’s inability to reconcile growth-orientation with a more human face. As such, the third mechanism behind coherence – the necessity to spread its contradictions – was activated. With the SDGs, the Commission successfully reproduced the contradictory nature of Coherence at the global level. This, in turn, opened the avenue to push for coheritization at the internal level, with the final speech act; the revised Consensus on development (2017).

Indeed, a clear side-effect of the Agenda 2030 is that after its adoption, coheritization at the international level functioned as a sort of boomerang that induced discursive and institutional selectives to all agents at the European level. Prior to 2015, PCD had been a “dusty concept” that was in need of political reinvigoration (interview 1). The SDGs provided an effective actualization of the discursive and institutional selectives instigated by the coheritization speech act. This actualization redefined the connotation one can add to coherence to Coherence by design. This is especially so because the SDGs have become the main tools that civil society organizations have campaigned on in the development sphere (Hege & Demailly, 2017). One simply cannot avoid talking about the SDGs, including the concomitant commitment to coheritization, exemplified in particular by Goal 17. Additionally, the SDGs more concretely instigate a governance structure of PPPs and multi-stakeholderism that entraps all agents in a self-reinforcing cycle of coheritization. This is strengthened by the increasing tendency of governments to force CSOs to align themselves to frameworks such as the MDGs and SDGs, by making disbursement of funds conditional upon the acceptance of them (Vleugels, 2016: 51). Through these mechanisms, policy coherence acts as a sort of permanent Trotskyian counter-revolution that seeks to mitigate capitalism’s contradictions by spreading them globally.

In sum, all of the three theorized mechanisms have – at varying times – been actualized and transformed. The empirical material reveals that coheritization entails more than a single speech act. The multiple speech acts (1992; 2005; 2012; 2015; 2017) were produced under similarly contradictory situations and display a hybridity between criticizing and legitimizing capitalism. One can also see how the coheritization speech act actually aims at a second perlocutionary effect: *(5) all policies are now envisioned and designed sine qua non along the principles of (2 & 3).*

From this discussion we can reconstruct the coheritization speech act; a global speech act that includes discursive and institutional selectives that were in turn established through earlier speech acts. To illustrate the coheritization speech act, its five core tenets found throughout the chapter are summarized below and analytically captured in Table 2.

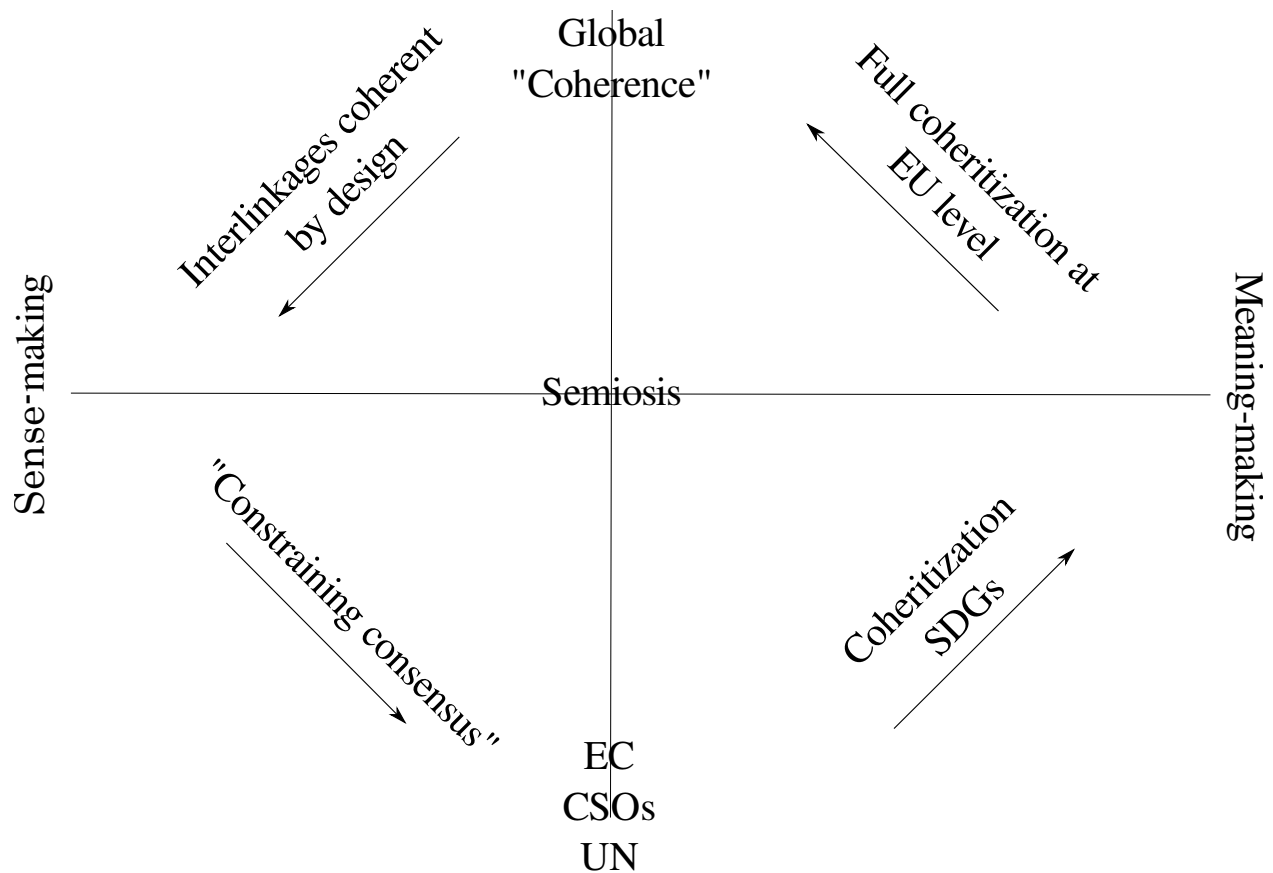
- (1) All policy areas are interlinked;
- (2) The interlinkages do not mutually reinforce each other by default, but can be made so;
- (3) To overcome resistance against the EC's accumulation regime from all sides, synergies between aid and non-aid areas should be found through a combination of coordination, ex-ante impact assessments, and consultation of stakeholders;
- (4) Taking 1-3 in mind, speaking of Coherence by default or as fundamental / impossible challenges in itself becomes impossible;
- (5) All policies are now envisioned and designed *sine qua non* along the principles of (2 & 3).

**Table 2:** The coheritization speech act

Speech act	Type	Actualization	Semiotic range
(0)		Treaty of Rome (1957)	Impossible-default
(1)	Locutionary	Maastricht Treaty (1992)	Fundamental-default
(2)	Locutionary	ECD + 2009-2011 PCD reports	Fundamental-design
(3)	Illocutionary	2012 PCD consultation	Problem-design
(4)	Perlocutionary	SDGs (2015)	Problem-design
(5)	Perlocutionary	Revised ECD (2017)	Design?

Top to bottom, one finds the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts that make up the coheritization speech act. Coheritization comprehensively restructures the discursive and participatory space within which actors operate without fundamentally altering the core accumulation regime of the current neoliberal variety of global capitalism. Coheritization is shaped by reconciling contradicting discursive perspectives and institutional realities into a new mode of regulation, while at the same time entrapping the discursive playing field of all agents by altering their interests and potential to participate in debates on external EU policy to the predilection of the European Commission. The table captures the moments that actualized the next step in the process towards coheritization, and the respective restrictions in the semiotic space.

**Figure 14:** Phase 3 semiosis



In conclusion to the analysis, Figure 14 summarizes this third and final phase. Most importantly, we have gone from a permissive consensus (2005-2015) towards a *constraining consensus*. The semiotic range of how one can define North-South relations is further confined, and this – rather authoritatively – excludes more fundamental and radical criticism from consideration. Although this illocutionary entrapment is a powerful sense- and meaning-making device, its actual success remains to be seen in the wake of ever-more visible and salient fractures in the (authoritarian) Northern ne-liberal hegemony.

## 5. Conclusion

The research question of this thesis was: *What explains the expanding use of “coherence” as a signifier for external EU policy vis-à-vis less industrialized countries?* The goal of this question was – in a narrow sense – to see why the EU has seemingly adjusted its self-definition vis-à-vis developing countries with the increased reference to the concept of policy coherence (for development). By answering this question, the research can fill an important gap in our understanding of the changing sphere of development and external policy at large. Beyond this narrow goal, the aim of answering this question is to see to what extent the theoretical model of semiosis works as an explanans to the explanandum.

### *5.1. Resolving the coherence paradox: between complexity, contestation, and ambition*

This thesis has proposed semiosis – the perpetual cycle of sense- and meaning-making – as a way to reveal the mechanisms, events, and interpretations that predicate the material and ideational transformations in the sphere of external EU policy that have come to pass over the last decades. A particular means through which agents interact with their broader social structures are speech acts. With a speech act, one can seek to actualize his/her own views as a new part of existing structures. If successful, one slowly alters the trajectory of history by inducing a proclivity to steer the semiotic process to one's own predilection. The central story line of this thesis has been to show that this is the basic logic that underpins the rise of policy coherence.

The original speech act of coherence was born in the 1990s out of mounting complexity of the international sphere caused by the transnationalization of capitalism. This necessitated a new paradigm for development; a paradigm that reconciles the necessity of development aid with the expansion of global capitalism, and one that is sensitive to the interlinkages between all external areas. As this discursive selective instigated by the Maastricht Treaty eventually entrapped all actors, it allowed for reproduction under its own discursive and institutional terms. Civil society organizations criticized the Commission for its incoherencies between development and areas such as trade and agricultural policies throughout the 1990s. Contestation around capitalism's inherent limitations through the alter-globalization campaigns further delegitimized the global economic and political system. The EC reacted to this contestation by ultimately embracing the necessity of coherent interlinkages in its own way. The 2005 European Consensus on Development hence presented a new discursive selective: the idea that interlinked policy areas can be made coherent by design. On the one hand, this provides a tacit but necessary concession that full liberalization is detrimental to development in the South. This constrains the most fundamental criticism. On the other hand, it also constrains the EC and proponents of transnational capitalism by rendering the most ardent pursuit of liberalization impossible. As such, coherence fulfills a stabilizing role on both a discursive/ideational and material level.

Beyond constraining, strategic selectives also enable. As coherence became more widespread after 2005, it enabled a shift towards the semiotic center, where Coherence by design could be popularized at the expense of more outspoken approaches. This materialized in the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon that expanded the remit of PCD to the entirety of EU external policy. The Lisbon Treaty represents the tipping-point where we went from coherence to coheritization. Because all policies are essentially formulated on a continuum from incoherent to coherent, the depoliticizing nature of coherence's incited road to the semiotic center hereby attained a totalizing and encapsulating effect to external policy-making. As all policies are now perceived to be made coherent, actors will find it increasingly difficult to at once partake in debates on external policy-making while at the same time arrogating a critical tone towards the policies and policy-making process in general. At the same time, all actors are constrained by coheritization because the staunchest advocates for neoliberalism must forfeit at least some of their position in pursuit of coherence.

Another factor that further complicates matters is the increasingly contested global role of the EU in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. The EU's attempt to stabilize its accumulation regime impeded growth and stability in the South. Beyond this material effect, the consequence has been a loss of legitimacy and a threat to Northern hegemony. Moreover, the rise of several credible alternatives for Northern development frameworks further jeopardize primacy of the global North (Bresser Pereira, 2015: 17; Wan, 2016). These developments do not rhyme well with the European 'global Europe' ambition (Orbie, 2012). It has become increasingly clear that such a position necessitates a more holistic 'whole of Union' approach. Policy coherence plays an important part in this respect. It acknowledges the existence of incoherencies and (at least discursively) seeks to overcome them.

However, the ultimate goal behind coherence – to mitigate capitalism's deficiencies – failed and this subsequently pushed the Commission to spread Coherence to the global level. The adoption of the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals has played a peculiar role coheritizing the EU-level. This research has shown the Coheritizing ambitions of the Commission. Importantly, coheritization only became widely accepted at the European level after the adoption of the Agenda 2030. As such, it seems that there is an unanticipated multi-level aspect to semiosis. First, the Commission spread coherence to the global level through the SDGs, but importantly, the comprehensive framework bears more legitimacy and indeed, hegemony, and therefore preordains the selection of possible meanings one can attribute to (sustainable) development at the EU level. The SDGs in this sense were contagious in their coheritizing selectives; all actors, including governments, civil society actors, and corporations, are bound to the meaning of the SDGs, providing a proclivity to accept the contradictory nature of capitalism that coheritization represents. It remains to be seen to what

extent the Commission and/or other EU institutions were responsible for coheritizing the SDGs, but the sense- and meaning-making impact of the SDGs on EU actors is clear.

All in all, the rise of coherence and its adjuvant transformation towards coheritization should be seen as a series of speech acts that – as time went on – evolved into an entirely new way of organizing the perpetually contradictory structure of capitalism, the always on-going contestation from within and outside, the wealth of interpretations on these mechanisms one may have, and the participation chances of actors seeking to change it. The movement towards coheritization has sublated the dialectic between capitalism's limitations and its tendency towards self-perseverance, and shows how sense- and meaning-making can go from discourse to social practice, how agents and structures affect one another, how the material and ideational interact, and how this entire process is recursive in its open-endedness.

## *5.2. Strengths and limitations of the approach*

No study is free of flaws and limitations, and this thesis forms no exception. Firstly, the author wishes to make an empirical caveat. Although the focus on the Commission's activities have provided a clear delineation of source material, enabling among others the discourse network analysis approach, it paints less than a complete picture of all developments surrounding the explanandum. Both at EU-level and beyond, a large number of contingent and related developments have not been considered to their fullest. Firstly, though the Commission is arguably the preeminent actor in both institutional and discursive terms, the Parliament has also played an important role with its involvement in adopting the ECD and its subsequent 2017 revision. Next, the Council holds considerable influence, especially due to the mixed competence of development. Therefore, to fully capture the rise of Coherence, the role of the Parliament and Council should be explored further. Third, the role of the OECD and specifically its DAC did not feature prominently in this thesis, although Verschaeve et al (2016) convincingly show that the DAC has been instrumental in promoting PCD. Finally, the thesis has explored the role of the EU in coheritizing the SDGs, but this ultimately became more of a case of the SDGs coheritizing EU development policy. To delineate the cluster of actors around the SDGs, far more research is necessary, not just regarding the SDGs, but also regarding their financing structure, which goes back at least until the 2011 Busan high-level meeting on development finance (Weber, 2017: 408-409). In spite of these empirical shortcomings, the contents of this thesis are arguably sufficient to succeed on their own accord because of the Commission's primacy in promoting Coherence (Carbonne & Keijzer, 2016; Verschaeve et al, 2016).

Next, a number of epistemological caveats must be made. Fundamentally, the mixed-methods approach has worked well in terms of exposing the different levels within the critical realist ontology. By combining rigorous and more quantitative discourse network analysis with a more hermeneutic

approach of interviews and analysis of scientific and policy-literature, this thesis has struck a balance that simultaneously avoids ontological reductionism and (too much) epistemological relativism. The multi-method design has also allowed for triangulation, greatly increasing the validity of the findings and the plausibility of the theoretical argument. Although the methods work well in conjunction, on an individual base, several limitations should be pointed out. First, the number of interviews is relatively limited and an on-site decision of the researcher not to record two of the conversations admittedly limits their inferential value. Finally, coding the documents proved at times to be rather difficult. For instance, the line between agreeing that Coherence is a fundamental problem versus disagreeing that it can be attained by default was at times razor thin. The author takes sole responsibility for the interpretations of the policy documents.

### *5.3. Discussion and avenues for future research*

How do these conclusions reflect upon the theoretical and societal debates discussed in this thesis? From a societal point of view, coheritization presents us with a sort of ‘embedded neoliberalism’, one that adheres to its fundamental principles but claims to iron out the most egregious social and ecological detriments. However, many authors have rightfully exerted skepticism to the transformative potential that PCD is said to offer (Chandler, 2007; Carbonne, 2008; Alonso et al, 2010: 10; Orbie, 2012: 31; Thede, 2013; Negre, 2013: 2; Siitonen, 2016). As Thede (2013: 791) cogently argues, the central issue with coherence is: “who – in this world of asymmetrical power relations – decides what is coherent”. Indeed, the Commission’s vociferous endorsement of PCD as a means to overcome global unsustainabilities in both social, economic, and ecological terms remains unconvincing at best and self-undermining at worst. Research shows that – good intentions notwithstanding – results on improving coherence between policy areas have thus far been very limited (Carbonne and Keijzer, 2016). What is more, the fact that the governance structure of the SDGs once again embraces flawed frameworks such as foreign direct investments and multilateral reciprocal trading as means of implementation does not bode well for the potential to truly transform the social order into one that is coherent with sustainable ecological and social goals. As such, PCD has been very successful in affecting the debate, but its impact on the ground remains subject of considerable and healthy skepticism. Speaking of discourse, coheritization could actually hurt its own normative goals because this thesis has shown how it negatively impacts participation chances of critical voices who might bring legitimate criticism. Coheritization hereby exerts a form of semiotic violence: it authoritatively exempts critical voices from participation in debates on Coherence by limiting the scope of what is semiotically permeable. In this sense, the narrative of this study is socially relevant because it constitutes a speech act in itself that provides a critical counter-narrative to the dominant discourse and social practices in EU external policy.

In theoretical terms, this thesis aims to shed new light on the complex and interrelated agency-structure and material-ideational spheres. In particular, the role of language has been instrumental. Although linguistic and cultural turns in the political economy literature are nothing new, many of the attempts to promote the role of language have suffered from linguistic reductionism by failing to strike a proper ontological balance between the realm of linguistic and non-linguistic symbols. In particular, this is problematic for the securitization literature. A theory that presents discourses as self-referential is at great risk of entrapping itself in an infinite cycle of hermeneutics that fails to properly capture the social contexts of actors and processes and the consequences they evoke on both material and ideational grounds. Therefore, authors using speech act theory should not take its ontological nominalism for granted and critically re-evaluate these assumptions. As a solution, this thesis argues for the necessity to turn speech act theory on its head by putting the material first and carving out an irreducible role for (social) structures. As for critical theory, the main contribution of this thesis is the conclusion that the recent theorization on authoritarian neoliberalism (e.g., Bruff, 2014; Tansel, 2017) is overly material. Beyond its ability to make use of the state's legal and constitutional means and by 'putting boots on the ground', capitalism and its inherent contradictions are also capable of excluding social forces through semiotic processes. Therefore, critical authors can gain valuable insights by taking a cultural turn and study speech act theory and its untapped emancipatory potential.

The research provides a number of future entry-points. First, the idea of coheritization may not be confined to simply being a useful heuristic for this thesis. Rather, it carries a promising new way to conceptualize the sphere of external (development) policy that could be further explored. For instance, one can study in more detail the build-up to the SDGs and ascertain who coheritized who, how, and when. Another theoretical discovery is the multi-level nature of semiosis as revealed by the SDGs. Expanding on this thought, one could not only imagine events at traditional levels such as the local, regional, transnational, and global to all have their own distinct but interrelated semiotic processes. Rather, it would be interesting to further see how semiosis affects civil society activities 'on the ground'. Are agents more inclined to take cognitive shortcuts and rely on what they already know, or do practical situations rather provide more space to play with the boundaries of what is semiotically permeable? Finally, one could explore to what extent semiosis can help critical forces to successfully challenge discursive and institutional structures. For instance, this thesis has shown how the discursive and institutional structure of the debate around Coherence is actually self-undermining, contrary to the belief of NGOs (interview 3). In this sense, speech acts and semiosis could provide critical social forces with a positive dialectic; an ability to clearly see capitalism's contradictions and the material and ideational boundaries within which one can enact social change. This synthesis of theory and political praxis could be a useful entry-point for critical scholars and activists alike.

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### **List of interviews**

- Interview 1: Member of the European Commission, DG DEVCO.
- Interview 2: Senior member of the European Commission, DG Trade; Member of the European Commission, DG Trade; Member of the European Commission, DG Trade.
- Interview 3: Development NGO representative.
- Interview 4: Member of the European Commission, DG DEVCO

## **Appendices**

### *I Interview guide*

#### **Questionnaire:**

#### **The rise of policy coherence for (sustainable) development (PCD)**

##### **1 Policy coherence**

- What were your government's / organization's motivations for establishing/promoting policy coherence?
- Why do you think the EU has embraced PCD as a tool to establish synergies between developmental and non-developmental policies?

##### **2 The role of non-state actors (civil society, business representatives)**

- How would you describe the role that non-state actors have played in promoting policy coherence?
- What is your impression of the role that non-state actors have played in expanding the notion of PCD across EU external policy?
- In the past decade, what were the most common positive and negative comments regarding PCD provided by non-state actors? Did the input differ per organization (e.g., civil society organizations, business)?

##### **3 The role of other EU institutions**

- To what extent has the EU contributed to the rise of policy coherence?
- To what extent do interpretations of policy coherence differ within the European Commission?
- To what extent do other organizations such as the European Parliament and Council refer to policy coherence?
- Do you perceive a difference in interpretation among the EU institutions?
- To what extent does the idea of policy coherence influence the day-to-day activities of the European Commission?

##### **4 The role of International Organizations**

- To what extent is the European debate on policy coherence influenced by the OECD?

- To what extent has the debate on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) contributed to the European debate on policy coherence?
- To what extent has the EU influenced the debate on policy coherence in the OECD and the UN?

## **5 The future of policy coherence**

- To what extent do you think the EU has been successful in establishing a coherent external policy?
- How do you envision the future of policy coherence?

*Thanks for your cooperation!*

## *II Coding sheet*

A total of 225 position papers have been coded, totaling in a length of approximately 4000 pages<sup>14</sup>. Coding was performed semi-automatically. Based on inductive exploration, regular expressions<sup>15</sup> were added to the Discourse Network Analyzer software. Over time, this provided a Coherence ‘vocabulary’ of oft-used terms and phrases. The following regular expressions have been used:

- PCD
- PCSD
- Econom(ylic)
- Synerg(ylies)
- Trad(eling)
- Root [as in: root cause]
- Coheren(tlce)
- Business
- MIC [middle-income country]
- ^ODA\$
- (Private)
- (Harm)
- (Jobs)
- (Growth)
- Harness
- Opportunit(ylies)
- Link(edling)
- Silo
- Fai(llure)
- MDG
- Consisten(tlcy)
- (inlex)ternal
- (unlin)equa(lllityllities)
- Align
- Ex-(antelpost)

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<sup>14</sup>Including all the coded statements goes beyond the scope of even the appendix. Therefore, the researcher has made the coding from the three consultations available online: <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/zxjb7zmb9smgrk4/AACcAXCIIsj80PGpSJqq7Id-Ka?dl=0>.

<sup>15</sup>A regular expression (regex) is a series of characters that functions as a search pattern. They can highlight signifiers such as words and phrases so that the coder is able to immediately identify the relevant parts in the text.

- Globali(s)ation

Coding of the statements has occurred based on the following coding sheet. The Discourse Network Analyzer software (Leifeld et al, 2018) can code statements based on the following operators:

- Actor/organization
- Person [if applicable]
- Concept [the different Coherence ideal types]
- Agreement [yes or no]

What follows is the pre-determined rules for how the statements should be coded. The rules correspond to the idealtypical connotations, whereas the statements are the linguistic denotations. Every coding rule is illustrated with an example.

#### Coherence by default:

**Y:** The wording of the statement indicates that the actor perceives economic liberalization policies (e.g., opening markets to foreign trade and capital) to be unambiguously positively correlated to the interests of developing countries. No (institutional) adjustments on behalf of European countries and corporations are required.

Example: “The European Union should engage more wholeheartedly in general trade liberalisation instead of offering economically doubtful benefits to developing countries. General trade liberalisation not only generates economic growth in developing countries but also in the industrialised world.” (European Chemical Industry Council, 2005: 2).

**N:** The actor clearly states that liberalization policies are not beneficial to the (development) interests of developing countries. However, the statement does not make specific recommendations for how to overcome this deficit.

Example: “There is no evidence that liberalisation necessarily leads to sustainable development and poverty reduction. Developing countries should not, therefore, be forced into liberalising unless they themselves choose to follow that route, and then only at the speed and to the extent they decide” (Bond, 2005: 1).

#### Coherence by design:

**Y:** The context of the statement makes clear that liberalization policies are not sufficient in and of themselves. However, the statement accentuates the positive side and frames incoherencies between different EU external policies as a positive-sum opportunity to be exploited. This can be done without

major adjustments to EU and global liberalization policies.

Example: “The EU can strategically link its development, trade, climate and other policies to support partner countries in achieving the SDGs and promote the EU’s strong commitments to sustainable development, human rights, democracy, the participation of civil society and good governance.” (WWF, 2016: 12).

**N:** The statement clearly indicates that incoherencies between different policy areas are problematic and cannot be solved without more major or even fundamental adjustments to EU and global liberalization policies. However, it does not make specific recommendations for how the readjustment to the interest of developing countries should take shape.

Example: “There is a need for coherence of EU policies affecting developing countries, as stipulated in the Constitutional Treaty, and at the same time the need to assure that development policy is not made subordinate to other policy areas (trade, common foreign and security policy, agriculture).” (Finnish NGO Platform, 2005: 1).

#### Coherence as an institutional problem:

**Y:** The statement accentuates the negative side of incoherencies between EU developmental and non-developmental policies rather than the positive. Incoherencies are clearly framed as a problem. The solution to the problem, however, is still at the level of institutions; the division of labor between North and South (i.e., the multilateral trading system; investment regime, and global intellectual property rights regime) in itself is not questioned.

Example: “PCD must strengthen accountability in all decision-making processes and be responsive to the needs and concerns of the poor and vulnerable. The future framework must uphold equality and equity at the global level and also consider the impact of rich countries’ policies in areas such as trade, climate change actions, agriculture. Therefore, this future framework support should also consider developing institutional mechanisms that prevent negative impact on poor and vulnerable people at all levels.” (International Council for Adult Education, 2012: 7)

**N:** The statement emphasizes that Coherence is not problematic to the extent that institutional readjustments are necessary, but does not provide a concrete indication as to if and/or what action is required to attain coherence.

Example: No examples encountered in the consultations.

#### Coherence as a fundamental problem:

**Y:** The context of the statement exhibits fundamental skepticism as to the possibility to reconcile political and economic interests in the North and South within the current context of the global economic

system. Fundamental reforms to North-South relations and sacrifices to Northern interests (e.g., debt cancellation, reforming intellectual property rights and the multilateral trade regime) are necessary to achieve coherence.

Example: “Without radical changes in developed countries’ policies towards sustainable patterns of consumption and production, policy coherence for sustainable development [...] fair as well as environmentally and human rights friendly trade policies, access to technology, reform of the intellectual property rights regime and debt cancellation for poor countries, a new development framework will never gear us towards a sustainable future.” (Eurostep, 2012: 4).

**N:** The actor’s statement downplays the claim that incoherencies between EU policies are detrimental to the interests of developing countries. It does however not make clear where the actor stands with regard to what is (or is not) required to mitigate incoherencies.

Example: No examples encountered in the consultations.

#### Coherence as impossibility:

**Y:** The statement clearly indicates that even within the most radical reforms within the structure of global capitalism, coherence is impossible to attain, due to the fact that capitalism itself is inherently exploitative and dependent on exploitation of humans and nature to subsist, and therefore irreconcilable with broader goals such as human rights and environmental sustainability.

Example: No examples encountered in the consultations.

**N:** The statement emphasizes that coherence is indeed possible at all to achieve, without making references to how coherence should be achieved (assuming that coherence is not already the default state of affairs).

Example: No examples encountered in the consultations.

### *III Discourse network analysis: technicalities*

Once the coding of the documents is completed, the results can subsequently be visualized. Discourse network analysis allows for two types of graphs: co-occurrence and affiliation networks. The former is a one-mode network that draws ties ('edges') between actors ('nodes') if they hold the same view (e.g., both agreeing on category X; both disagreeing on category Y). This process is carried out for all nodes until every node in the figure is connected to all possible nodes with which it holds  $\geq 1$  shared understandings. Additionally, thickness of the edge increases based on the number of concepts shared and the number of instances that a concept is mentioned in a document. Because of the vast amounts of information, the initial result in an unstructured image with countless edges between the various nodes. This reveals an important consideration for graphical network analysis. Although network graphs can be powerful tools revealing valuable information about the make-up of a network and the (sometimes hidden) propensity of actors to agree or disagree, without careful management they can become messy and actually distracting rather than informative.

For this reason, the network must be visualized in ways that enable visual and intuitive analysis. To this end, one can make use of two instruments: (1) positioning of the nodes and (2) color-coding clusters of nodes. Regarding the positioning of the nodes, the graphs are drawn on the basis of the ForceAtlas 2 algorithm as described by Jacomy et al (2014). Without going into too much technical detail, the algorithm determines the (relative) position of nodes based on the 'force' between it and other nodes. Disagreement or a lack of any relation exert a repulsive force whereas edges function as springs that attract the nodes closer together. In other words: when actors are more similar, they are grouped together, and when they are less similar, they are distanced from dissimilar cluster(s) of nodes. On the topic of clustering, algorithms exist that can detect clusters of nodes or modularity within a network. This thesis employs the modularity algorithm as described by Blondel et al (2008). In brief, edge weights (i.e., the relative number of co-occurrences) are used to determine how many clusters exist within the network. Clusters are a powerful tool to enable an informed representation of the network. Finally, the resolution of the modularity determines the number of clusters in a network (Lambiotte et al, 2008). The higher the resolution, the lower the amount of clustering and vice-versa. Although resolution is partially determined by the inherent properties of a network (such as size), at part it also comes down to a choice made by the researcher. If the researcher feels that the clusters at any resolution do not accurately depict the actual network, the resolution may be changed. The researcher can subsequently use color-codes to enable easy distinction between the various clusters. The Gephi software package (Bastian et al, 2009) is used to visualize the one-mode co-occurrence network.

Beyond the co-occurrence network, discourse network analysis also allows for a second type of

network visualization: a two-mode affiliation network. Here, agents are not directly tied to one another but rather tied to the concepts that they agree or disagree with. The affiliation network provides important complementary value because it shows at a glance the underlying make-up of the congruence network. In brief, it shows the concepts that actors agree and disagree with. To provide a more informative picture, nodes are color-coded based on the modularity algorithm in the congruence network. The Visone software package (Brandes & Wagner, 2004) is used to visualize the two-mode affiliation network. Together with the congruence network, the affiliation network reveals the (changing) make-up of discourse around EU development policy.