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Alibaba's discourse for the digital Silk Road: the electronic World Trade Platform and 'inclusive globalization'

Maximiliano Facundo Vila Seoane 

School of Politics and Government, National University of San Martín, Buenos Aires, Argentina

The digital Silk Road, which involves the internationalization of Chinese internet firms across countries that are party to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has remained underexplored in the literature. This paper employs a poststructuralist discourse theory to analyze one of the most important Chinese internet firms, Alibaba, and its initiative for global trade: the electronic World Trade Platform (eWTP). The article argues that the eWTP is a counter-hegemonic discourse that, based on the economic and technological power of Alibaba and its support of the BRI, attempts to globalize a China-centered and privately led global digital trade order to challenge the previous wave of US-led globalization. However, the eWTP has at least five contradictions. First, despite its criticisms of globalization, the initiative remains essentially neoliberal. Secondly, it sidelines inherent tensions with the Chinese state-centric internet governance model. Thirdly, it excludes some social identities and makes utopian promises. Fourthly, it is unclear to what extent it really will be inclusive. Finally, unless carefully hedged, it might entrap partner countries in new types of problematic digital dependence.

Keywords: Digital Silk Road; Alibaba; poststructuralist discourse theory; eWTP; Malaysia

Introduction

In September 2013, President Xi Jinping inaugurated the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a landmark multibillion-dollar enterprise to build maritime and land-based infrastructure projects connecting China with countries in Africa, Asia, and Europe. According to the official narrative, the BRI would promote a new type of open and inclusive globalization seeking to benefit all actors involved in the process (Liu & Dunford, 2016; Xi, 2017). More recently, the BRI has also incorporated nations from Central and Latin America, including more than 120 partner countries to make the project truly global in reach. As part of the broader literature examining the rise of China, the breadth and ambition of the BRI has inspired several recent investigations scrutinizing its implications for the global order (Callahan, 2016; Fierke & Antonio-Alfonso, 2018), particularly about how these infrastructure projects might challenge US primacy (Zhou & Esteban, 2018), and its impacts on the bilateral relationships between China and partner countries (Liu & Lim, 2018; Rabena, 2018). These contributions are undoubtedly important for unravelling the effects of the BRI. However, the BRI's digital element, known as the "digital Silk Road", has been underexplored in Anglophone academic

*Corresponding author. Email: mvila@unsam.edu.ar

research (Fung, Aminian, Fu, & Tung, 2018; Shen, 2018), which is surprising given the importance of the “digital economy” in contemporary global politics.

So what is the digital Silk Road? The term and its variations (e.g. cyber, electronic, informational, or online Silk Road) have been used in different policy documents, public speeches, and projects of the Chinese government that reference the cooperation and business projects of its digital sectors with BRI countries (Shen, 2018). For instance, the vision of China’s National Development and Reform Commission (2015) for the BRI identified the construction of an informational Silk Road as a priority. Likewise, the 13th Five Year Plan published by the Central Committee of the Communist Part of China (2016, p. 71) includes the intention to “develop an online Silk Road with the Arab countries and others” through high-speed fiber optic networks. Similarly, during his keynote speech at the 2017 Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Xi (2017) proposed to “advance the development of big data, cloud computing and smart cities so as to turn them into a digital silk road of the twenty-first century”. Chinese internet firms are without doubt the central actor of the digital Silk Road, which according to Shen (2018) have willingly joined this state-led initiative for five reasons: addressing the national problem of industrial overcapacity, internationalizing Chinese small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), strengthening the national currency in competition with the US dollar, constructing a China-centered digital infrastructure, and promoting “inclusive globalization”.

Investigating the digital Silk Road is relevant because it is reasonable to expect that it may become the backbone of what Thussu (2018) named as China’s “digital globalization”, therefore paving the way to comprehending the ongoing competition between China and the USA over the future of internet governance (Schiller, 2011; Segal, 2018). Yet little is known about how specific firms are embracing and operationalizing the digital Silk Road. This paper contributes to this line of inquiry by thoroughly exploring the links to the BRI of one of the most important Chinese internet firms, Alibaba. As a part of its internationalization strategy, its charismatic founder, Jack Ma, has been promoting a project for global trade since 2016, the so-called “electronic World Trade Platform” (eWTP), which aims to make globalization far more inclusive than in the past through its digital platforms and infrastructure. At the time of writing this paper, the eWTP has officially started projects in partnership with Malaysia, Rwanda, and Belgium, and has announced future projects in several other countries. Furthermore, the eWTP is collaborating with international organizations, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), UNCTAD, and UNDP. In that sense, it is not just another business unit of the firm, but a clear and bold initiative to shape global trade that expresses the growing influence of Chinese internet firms. This eWTP is of interest to media and communication studies because its expansion depends on repetitive and sophisticated communication practices by Alibaba and its founder. In this context, this paper asks what are the features and contradictions of the eWTP? How does the initiative relate to the BRI? And what are its global implications?

The article argues that the eWTP is a counter-hegemonic discourse that, based on the economic and technological power of Alibaba and its support of the BRI, attempts to globalize a China-centered and privately-led global digital trade order to challenge the previous wave of US-led globalization and its infrastructure. This analysis uses poststructuralist discourse theory (Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Howarth, 2009) to explore the texts (i.e. audio-visual, statements, webpages) of the

eWTP and its first global eHub located in Malaysia (Alibaba, 2016; KiniTV, 2018; Ma, 2018; MY DEC, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c; Tao, 2018). Although exploratory, the analysis characterizes and criticizes the articulation of social, political, and fantasmatic logics by Alibaba to advance its global project. Like the BRI, the eWTP claims to be inclusive; however, I argue that the initiative has at least five contradictions. First, despite its criticisms of globalization and the promise of reform, it remains essentially neoliberal. Secondly, the claim to advance the BRI sidelines inherent tensions within the Chinese state-centric internet governance model. Thirdly, the political and fantasmatic logics of the eWTP are problematic due to neglected identities and utopian promises. Fourthly, it is unclear to what extent the eWTP will really be inclusive or, instead, just another way of enlarging social differences in favor of transnational capital. Finally, the digitalization of trade following Alibaba's initiative—unless carefully hedged—may entrap partner countries in new types of problematic digital dependence.

Theoretical approach

To understand the eWTP, I use poststructuralist discourse theory (PDT), which is a relational, post-Marxist discourse approach which understands that discourses are relevant not only for interpreting the world, but also for shaping social relations. PDT postulates that “the construction of any discourse involves the taking of decisions in an undecidable terrain” (Howarth, 2009, p. 317). These types of decisions, called “radical acts”, are an expression of power since, according to Howarth (2009, p. 309), they “involve the drawing of political frontiers via the creation of multiple lines of inclusion and exclusion” constituting practices, policies, and regimes.¹ Inspired by the neo-Gramscian literature, hegemony is a key concept in this approach. In contrast to the realist perspective in international relations that limits hegemony to states, under this view hegemony considers the multiple ways in which particular forces of production at the national level extend influence inter- and transnationally, and have a dimension of both consensus and of coercion (Howson & Smith, 2008). On the one hand, hegemony is a practice of coalition-making or -breaking that depends on the use of empty signifiers to associate or differentiate demands from different social groups, which Howarth calls the logics of equivalence and difference, respectively. On the other hand, hegemony is a form of governance that can “elucidate a way in which a regime, practice or policy holds sway over a set of subjects by winning their consent or securing their compliance” (Howarth, 2009, p. 317). In this regard, fantasy plays a central role in understanding how discourses hide the contingency of radical acts and naturalize different types of domination. This concept, borrowed from Lacanian psychoanalysis, works either by promising a better future, once some hurdle is overcome, or predicting a catastrophe, if the challenge is not surmounted (Howarth, 2009, p. 322).

Howarth suggests five steps to conduct PDT. First, the analyst explores the different problematizations that may exist in a given policy or regime. Secondly, the approach uses retroductive reasoning to explain a discourse, which means it devises an explanandum of a problem in order to comprehend it with a reasonable explanans. Thirdly, in order to overcome the limits of causal mechanisms, i.e. natural science laws and hermeneutical approaches that focus on contextualized

interpretations, this approach aims to unveil the logic of a discourse, which refers to “the rules that govern a meaningful practice, as well as the conditions that make the operation of such rules possible” (Howarth, 2009, p. 325). For this aim, Glynos and Howarth (2007) propose a new grammar of logics, covering social, political, and fantasmatic logics, which in their view are central to understanding the emergence, maintenance and change of regimes. Social logics focus on diverse types of social practices and the rules and norms governing them (Howarth, 2009, p. 325), whereas political logics consider the moment of creating social practices or the contesting of previous ones. Fantasmatic logics scrutinize how subjects accept and identify with a social practice, either preserving old ones or adopting new ones, specifically by exploring the role of narratives. Fourthly, the analyst articulates how the different logics link together in a particular explanans, leading to a synthesis. Finally, after systematizing the contingent social identities and relations that a given hegemony has or wants to establish, it is possible to map alternative forms of organization. Following these steps, the next sections examine Alibaba and the eWTP.

Alibaba and globalization

In the classic book *The Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade tells the story of Ali Baba, a poor merchant who became rich after robbing the treasures of 40 thieves by learning the password ‘Open sesame!’ that opened the mouth of a cave where riches were hidden. Evidently inspired by this story, in 1999, an English teacher from Hangzhou, Jack Ma, led a group of 18 entrepreneurs and founded Alibaba. From the outset, Alibaba’s aim was “to make it easy to do business anywhere” (Alibaba, 2017; Ma, 2017) by using internet technology to enhance the competitive edge of SMEs, opening the gates for Chinese SMEs and consumers through the creation of now widely used e-commerce platforms. Although the company was widely criticized during its first years for being unable to make a profit, 20 years later, there is no room for such reproach. Indeed, in 2014, Alibaba made history by becoming the largest initial public offering at the New York Stock Exchange and at the beginning of November 2018 it had a market capitalization of approximately 380 billion dollars. These impressive numbers explain why Alibaba’s authorities claim that the company is in itself a sort of ‘economy’ with half a billion customers. Furthermore, almost 10 million SMEs use its platforms daily; they have a gross merchandise volume that, if compared to GDP, would place them as the twenty-second largest economy in the world (Erickson, 2017).

What does Alibaba do? Nowadays, it has varied and very successful business units (Alibaba, 2018). Its core business remains e-commerce, which can be divided into retail commerce in China through the Taobao and Tmall platforms, wholesale commerce in China with Alibaba, cross-border and global retail commerce through Aliexpress, Tmall global, and Lazada, and cross-border and global wholesale commerce through the Alibaba English portal. All of these digital platforms need to store, handle, and analyze large volumes of data, so Alibaba developed its own cloud infrastructure. This technical solution paved the way for the Alibaba Cloud, the cloud-computing business unit that offers sophisticated technologies to customers in China and abroad that were developed in-house (Zhang, 2017). The

company has also expanded to several other sectors through its investments, such as Youku, UC Headlines, and Alisports in the digital media and entertainment sector, Ant Financial in electronic payments, and Cainiao in logistics. In the less than two decades since its foundation, Alibaba has experienced a meteoric rise from a small, underfunded group of entrepreneurs to today's successful conglomerate of 66,421 employees (Alibaba, 2018, p. 186).

Besides technology development (Ma, 2017), Alibaba plans to continue its growth through its expansion into rural China and the further internationalization of the group (Clark, 2016). As part of the latter, Alibaba, and particularly Jack Ma, have become actively involved in ongoing debates over the future of globalization at international conferences and international organizations. In order to comprehend the magnitude of the challenge over the future of globalization, we have to acknowledge that since the fall of the USSR, the liberal world order that the USA initiated after World War II has been the predominant form of globalization. This order, characterized by the strategic restraint of its hegemon, the importance of international institutions that created incentives for states to remain in the system, and the increasing embedding of its liberal principles in states and other institutional structures (Ikenberry, 1999), was believed to offer more benefits than hindrances.

Nonetheless, since its emergence, neoliberal globalization has received considerable opposition across the world and its consequences have been denounced, such as increased inequality, unemployment, debt, job insecurity, deindustrialization, etc. Its detractors include academic critics and social movements that resist "free trade", such as ex-World Bank economists, the 1999 Seattle protests against the WTO, and the opposition of social movements in Latin America to the USA's project for a Free Trade Area of the Americas (Saguier, 2007; Stiglitz, 2002). Since 2016, even the governments that promoted neoliberal globalization, the USA and the UK, have begun putting globalization and the liberal world order under serious pressure. Indeed, President Trump's campaigns at both the national and the international levels turned against "globalism" and instead promoted an "America First" policy, based on patriotism, sovereignty, a disdain of multilateral institutions such as the WTO, and the use of tariffs and sanctions to impose the preferred position of the nation's contemporary administration. Along the same lines, the result of the British referendum to leave the European Union can be explained partly by the rise of nationalist positions as a challenge to the utopia of globalized and unregulated markets (Pettifor, 2017), together with a high dose of discrimination against migrants from continental Europe.

Against this backdrop, Alibaba has problematized globalization differently. Jack Ma concurs with much of the criticism of the exclusive nature of the prevailing social logics of globalization, which so far has worked mainly for a few thousand transnational corporations that benefit from container-based trade (UNCTAD, 2018). However, Jack Ma states,

The problem faced by globalisation today is not caused by globalisation itself. It's because globalisation remains immature and needs further improvement. Our responsibility today is not to reverse globalisation but to improve it (Ma, 2018).

Accordingly, Jack Ma proposes to advance a new wave of corporate-led globalization to empower millions of SMEs to operate globally. As the argument goes,

Table 1. Dimensions and features of the eWTP’s discourse.

Dimensions	Features
Argument	The eWTP is a counter-hegemonic discourse that attempts to globalize a China-centered and privately-led global digital trade regime
Social logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Globalization to date has benefitted mainly just a few transnational corporations• Globalization based on container movements• US-led globalization
Political logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• eWTP as a new type of ‘inclusive globalization’• Based on the trade in small packages• Enabled by a new digital infrastructure that speeds up trade• Part of the digital Silk Road, expands along the BRI• Logic of equivalence (different groups that are put together): SMEs, young people and women
Fantasmatic logic	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Partner countries will be able to emulate China’s success• If Jack Ma did it, other entrepreneurs can do so as well
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• eWTP in Malaysia, Rwanda, and Belgium

digital platforms and trading in small packages could enable this revolution, and so for these reasons, and in line with the BRI’s narrative, Alibaba speaks of “inclusive globalization” (Ma, 2017), implicitly in opposition to the previous US-led exclusive wave of globalization. Nonetheless, the question remains: how will such inclusive and digitally-mediated globalization be fulfilled?

The electronic World Trade Platform

In this section, I argue that the creation of Alibaba’s eWTP is a radical act that proposes a new digitally-enabled trade regime for an inclusive globalization. Based on the results of the PDT analysis, Table 1 synthesizes the main features of the eWTP, which I detail in this section, together with its first project in Malaysia.

What is the eWTP? At the 2016 Boao Forum for Asia, Jack Ma first communicated the idea, which was later detailed during the 2016 G20 meetings in Hangzhou by the B20 SME development taskforce that he chaired. In its final report, the B20 SME development taskforce recommended to endorse the eWTP: “a private sector-led and all stakeholder initiative, for public-private dialogue to incubate eTrade rules and foster a more effective and efficient policy and business environment for cross border electronic trade (eTrade) development” (B20, 2016, p. 4). How should such an initiative be implemented? The eWTP envisions that businesses will create electronic commerce hubs (so called “e-Hubs”), from which, thanks to the use of digital platforms and government benefits, SMEs will be able to export globally, with low or no taxes, fast logistics, and an efficient customs process (Alibaba, 2016). The “global” dimension of the eWTP will then be achieved by linking each e-Hub and virtual free-trade zone with each other. In this way, and “through the power of the internet, eWTP aims to build a more inclusive, free and innovative global trading platform for SMEs and consumers” (Alibaba, 2017, p. 62), thus building a global infrastructure for digital trade.

Is the eWTP a sort of new global trade governance mechanism? The name chosen for the initiative might suggest so. According to Alibaba, the eWTP is not

competing with the prominent WTO; rather, it is “a logical and natural complement” (Alibaba, 2016). However, in other public statements, Jack Ma has not shied away from expressing his contempt towards the WTO’s bureaucrats who cannot arrive quickly at a consensus in the way that businesspeople such as him usually manage to do (MY DEC, 2017a). Of course, Jack Ma is not the first—or the last—to express such criticism of the WTO, whose negotiation rounds face serious hurdles (O’Brien & Williams, 2016, p. 116). Nonetheless, the logical consequence of the eWTP and Jack Ma’s line of argumentation is that business leaders ought to be the ones leading the new wave of globalization, not governments, which should be relegated to secondary roles or at most enablers of private-led initiatives. Reinforcing these positions, Jack Ma states frequently that there is no need to regulate e-commerce; instead, the more governments are kept from introducing regulations, the better for entrepreneurs to innovate (Ma, 2018).

Despite taking such a critical position on states, the rise and expansion of the eWTP cannot be separated from the Chinese state-led project, the BRI, and specifically its digital Silk Road. On the one hand, in a recent letter to Alibaba’s shareholders, Jack Ma stated, “the Chinese government’s push for the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ presents a unique opportunity for Alibaba to grow our business internationally” (Ma, 2017). Those countries where the eWTP has advanced are all recipients of broader BRI projects, such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Rwanda. On the other hand, the eWTP is handy for Xi Jinping’s vision of China as a cyber superpower with increased cyber influence on countries across the BRI, which, in line with previous projects to foster “indigenous innovations” and “network sovereignty” (Zhao, 2010), aims to challenge the USA’s cyber-hegemony. By emulating the BRI, the eWTP also claims to foster a more inclusive² form of globalization, which clearly contests the prevailing social logics.

The eWTP intends to achieve such an objective through the benefits of e-commerce, particularly for three types of social identities: SMEs, young people, and women.³ In this discourse coalition central to the eWTP’s political logic, SMEs are important because Jack Ma believes that if their numbers increase, so will the middle classes, thereby contributing to more sustainable economies. The inclusion of young people and women in the discourse coalition seems to target two groups particularly damaged by neoliberal globalization. The drawing of political boundaries that include these three social identities consists of a logic of equivalence that links those disparate demands into one, which electronic commerce and digital entrepreneurship—of course, provided by Alibaba—can address.

The eWTP’s discourse advances a fantasmatic logic that captures “a particularly powerful way in which subjects are rendered complicit in concealing or covering over the radical contingency of social relations” (Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 101). It employs two recurring persuasion strategies: one at the country and the other at the entrepreneurial level (KiniTV, 2018; MY DEC, 2017a). As regards the latter, the promise is that any entrepreneur could follow in Jack Ma’s footsteps and become globally successful. The engaging part derives from Jack Ma, who, despite his humble origins, several rejections by leading USA universities and firms, and a lack of sophisticated technological knowledge, was still able to found and lead one of the most successful Chinese companies in history. His popularity in China is undeniable, perhaps even that of a “cult hero” (Clark, 2016), and he is also well-known abroad, which helps to cultivate such fantasy. As regards the country level, the narrative that Alibaba repeats is that 20 years ago, nobody

believed that e-commerce would work in China, because there was no internet, no trust, no logistics, etc.; and yet, precisely because of the “lack of” these elements, Alibaba was able to succeed by building them from scratch. Accordingly, the narrative suggests that it does not matter how poor a country might be as long as its entrepreneurs persist, in which case success will not be that far behind. These inspirational sides of the fantasmatic logic resonate very well in less developed countries, where entrepreneurs face similarly hard—and very often worse—conditions than the ones China experienced decades ago—something to which entrepreneurs in the US can hardly relate. Hence, both strategies pave the way to identifying with Alibaba’s founder, the trajectory of the firm, and the value proposition it offers.

Malaysia

How will the eWTP operate in practice? The new wave of corporate-led globalization from which the eWTP hails originated in 2015 with its first hub in the Hangzhou municipality where the company is headquartered. This e-Hub is part of a broader national experiment in China, the so-called “cross-border e-commerce pilot zones”, which aim to speed up cross-border e-commerce trade through business processes and technological innovations (Kai, 2016). Yet in order to comprehend the eWTP’s international dimension, this section synthesizes features from the first e-Hub that were extended beyond China’s borders, namely Malaysia’s Digital Free Trade Zone (DFTZ), which was inaugurated on December 3, 2017, by Jack Ma and Malaysia’s ex-Prime Minister, Najib Razak.

During the inauguration speech, Jack Ma stated that their aim was to digitalize local partners, support SMEs and young people, and empower them to internationalize their businesses (MY DEC, 2017a). His speech also reveals the counter-hegemonic intentions of the eWTP; for instance, he stated,

The difference between our model and the American or traditional model is that we come here looking for partners, we come here to enable partners, we want partners to be local king here, as we know only when partners succeed we can be successful, we come here to work with Malaysian young people (MY DEC 2017a).

Officially, Alibaba expressed two reasons why Malaysia was an important place to locate the first eWTP e-Hub (Malaysian Chinese Association, 2017). First, the country is a relevant hub within the broader Maritime Silk Road, which is part of the BRI. Secondly, Alibaba’s technologies are an excellent match for the demands of Malaysia’s pre-existing digital development strategy. Other potentially relevant factors in the selection of Malaysia that are common to Chinese investments in the country are the strategic relationship between the two nations and the large Malaysian ethnic Chinese community (Liu & Lim, 2018). The Malaysian government’s interest in the adoption of the project is rooted in its pre-existing National e-Commerce Strategic Roadmap, which aims to boost SMEs’ exports through e-commerce given that only 20–25% of such firms have presence online (MITI, 2016). Thus, according to ex-PM Razak, the DFTZ would contribute to e-commerce growth by facilitating billions of traded goods and by creating 60,000 jobs.

The DFTZ brings together different government-related state organizations in Malaysia with Alibaba business units; for instance, the operational pilot phase is

based on an arrangement between the Malaysian postal delivery service (Pos Malaysia) with the Lazada Group, an Alibaba-controlled e-commerce firm operating in the country. In 2020, the plan is to scale up the project by establishing a regional e-commerce e-fulfilment hub, i.e. a logistics hub with warehousing facilities, through collaboration with Cainiao and the Malaysia Airports Holdings Berhad (MAHB). Operationally, the government created a YouTube video of the DFTZ for entrepreneurs, explaining the basic process that the initiative facilitates (MY DEC, 2017c). A Malaysian entrepreneur uploads information on his or her products through Alibaba's cloud to Alibaba's online commerce platforms. This information goes to the Malaysia pavilion, a sub-portal where interested Chinese customers can acquire Malaysian products. Customers can also interact with the Malaysia-based vendor on Alibaba, and once an order is confirmed, the Malaysian seller begins the export process through varied digital facilities provided by DFTZ's one-stop e-services, such as logistic services, customs declarations, and shipment and FOREX facilities for receiving payments. After this step, the products are sent to DFTZ's hub, after which they are exported to China. In Alibaba's view, this process will breed a new type of SME that can sell globally and, in the process, it will go some way to materializing the vision of a more inclusive form of globalization.

At the heart of this system lies the platform that digitizes the whole process and, according to the authorities, has cut end-to-end cargo clearance from six hours to three hours, significantly reducing trade time. This means that the DFTZ is advancing a liberal model with almost no tariffs and shaping the export and import process to reduce any type of barrier as much as possible. This project of frictionless trade hinges on Alibaba's data technology provided by the Alibaba Cloud, which links Malaysian SMEs and consumers with their Chinese counterparts. Thus, Alibaba has become the key enabler of Malaysia's digitalization strategy by offering critical expertise and technical infrastructure for putting it into practice. Thus, the Malaysian e-Hub could be read as a new type of public-private (and transnational) partnership for digital trade. In this sense, the eWTP is operationalizing the strategy of the BRI, which "aims to complement the development strategies of countries involved by leveraging their comparative strengths" (Xi, 2017). Although the justification for the eWTP is based on challenging the contemporary trading system and globalization, it is hard not to view the project as a new form of governance in line with China's attempts to rewire the world order in its favor. Therefore, from a critical vantage point, joining the eWTP, and more broadly the digital Silk Road, can also mean a new sort of developing state dependence on the emerging China-centered transnational digital infrastructure.

Nonetheless, if we are guided by other BRI projects, it is already known that even small states like Malaysia still retain certain levels of agency to shape the potential outcomes in their favor (Liu & Lim, 2018). It is reasonable, therefore, to believe that this might still be the case with the DFTZ. After promising during the campaign to review most Malaysian-Chinese projects, Tun Mahatir, who defeated ex-PM Razak, decided to leave in place the association between Malaysia and Alibaba, thereby confirming the strategic importance of the project. This might be explained by the fact that, according to Malaysia's eTrade Outcome Assessment 2017, six months after the DFTZ's launch approximately 2600 SMEs joined the platform, generating RM 52.1 million (approx. 13.43 million dollars) in sales, out of which RM 18.1 million (approx. 4.67 million dollars) were from exports (The

Star, 2018). However, the Communication and Multimedia Minister recently stated that the DFTZ is open to many other firms and not limited to Alibaba, which suggests that the historical hedging strategy of Malaysia vis-à-vis China (Kuik, 2013) might be extended to this project.

Discourse and critique

In spite of the eWTP's potential for enabling digitalization processes in partner countries, in this section, I point out five contradictions of such discourse.

First, although the question of whether China's economic model is neoliberal remains disputed (Weber, 2018), despite its counter-hegemonic bent, it is fair to say that the eWTP's discourse remains neoliberal. The initiative aims to reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers to the minimum so that the trade of goods and services can be expedited across borders. Furthermore, Ma (2018) ardently supports free trade in all of his recent speeches by conflating all that is good with it, which explains his attacks on attempts by states to regulate e-commerce and internet platforms. These types of associations are obviously not new, and in effect they are similar to the political arguments for capitalism, prior to its success. In an influential essay, Hirschman (2013) reminded us that it was usual to argue for trade because of its potential for taming the worst human passions and for increasing interdependence among countries, which would inevitably lead to peace. However, these arguments neglect the critical literature that considers that "free trade" policies favor mainly developed countries, which in practice rarely follow such paths for their own economic growth, but instead for protectionist policies (Chang, 2002). Likewise, the eWTP's defense of an "inclusive globalization" hinges on the belief that the growth of SMEs will overcome the harmful excessive market power concentration in a few transnational corporations. Although this may help, it will not be enough without addressing other sources of citizens' concerns regarding globalization, such as low wages, the deterioration of workers' rights, poor social insurance, etc. (Stiglitz, 2017). In this light, in the attempt to further the BRI's 'inclusive globalization' approach, the eWTP is repeating the error of overselling globalization.

Secondly, the eWTP promises to advance the BRI; nonetheless, the features of its discourse, together with the complex relations between state and business in China, foretell certain unavoidable frictions. For example, the eWTP pretends to be global and corporate-led, a statement in tune with the neoliberal ideology of limited government interventions and a preference for practical businessmen that transnational capital prefers. This statement, if read literally, is obviously on a collision course with China's state-led, authoritarian-consultative development model. Given that it is common knowledge that private firms in China cannot avoid cultivating good relations with the government and its multiple agencies in order to flourish, it is reasonable to expect the disbelief of the average Western reader when poring over the statement that the eWTP will be an entirely corporate-led project. Conversely, many would believe that it is a proxy for the Chinese government to exert global influence. This is particularly problematic when considering the increasing reports on surveillance in China thanks to internet firms' innovations in partnership with the state (Segal, 2013; Zeng, 2016)—technology that might be exported abroad. Although such partnerships are not unique to China

and its specific state-society relations (for example, the US global surveillance programs exposed by Edward Snowden), they do expose an obvious contradiction within the eWTP discourse. Strong government regulation in China contrasts considerably with the “free trade” and “no regulations” elements of the eWTP’s narrative, and Alibaba has not been exempted from such pressure.

Thirdly, the eWTP’s political and fantasmatic logics are not without tensions. The political logic employs a logic of equivalence that targets a number of social identities (i.e. SMEs, young people, and women), whose struggles are bounded together to advance a business-led initiative, thus sidelining inefficient public officials or international organizations such as the WTO. Despite the appropriateness of such criticism, we should not forget that the WTO remains a highly democratic international organization, in which each country has the same voting power irrespective of its size or political relevance (O’Brien & Williams, 2016). Although it may be true that in some situations businesspeople make decisions faster for the sake of generating more profit, privileging such actors over others is highly problematic since it would inevitably accentuate the balance of power even more toward the private and transnational sector, rather than to open, democratic decision procedures. Alibaba, nonetheless, seems unconcerned about this scenario. In addition, the process of drawing boundaries around social identities that matter by definition pushes others aside, such as the exclusion of Alibaba’s competitors or other transnational corporations that benefitted from previous globalization waves. For instance, a recent critical article about the DFTZ by CNBC expressed fears that Alibaba’s influence on the project would lead to a sort of monopoly that would displace other companies, such as Amazon (Chandran, 2018). Likewise, the eWTP neglects other social identities that have suffered equally from neoliberal globalization, such as ethnic minorities, indigenous communities, the LGBT community, and older people, to name a few. As regards the fantasmatic logic, despite Alibaba and Jack Ma’s inspiring success story, it is hard to believe that everyone will follow a similar path. Realistically, most will not since it is very hard—if not impossible—to separate the story of the individual and his firm from the economic success of China, led by the Communist Party under the propitious conditions of the global economy, something that is hard to emulate by other countries and their entrepreneurs.

Fourthly, it is not clear who will reap the most benefits from the eWTP and its e-Hubs. We could naively believe Alibaba’s narrative that it will lead to digitally-enabled inclusive globalization among participating countries. Exploratory research on the use of Alibaba’s digital platforms by New Zealand’s SMEs suggests that they do allow easier access to the Chinese market (Jin & Hurd, 2018). However, the same article observes that deeper levels of internationalization with China require hiring local personnel to attain a fine-grained knowledge of the local market. This finding implies that mainly resourceful SMEs may be able to internationalize as Alibaba intends, whereas those without such capabilities will possibly find that going “digital” is just not enough. Furthermore, it might be true that foreign consumers and SMEs could benefit from the internationalization of low-cost Chinese SMEs through the eWTP and the BRI (Shen, 2018), but by building the electronic platforms for such growth, it seems reasonable to expect that Chinese exporting firms will overshadow competitors from foreign countries. The astonishingly low prices of products is a feature that attracts foreign buyers to Chinese digital portals, but this also means that SMEs producing similar

products in foreign countries will face tough competition from Chinese SMEs, and they could possibly be pushed out of business. The DFTZ may become the first example of this process, since, as Yean (2018) points out, the *de minimis* value for imports without paying taxes in Malaysia is far larger than in China (\$203 vs \$8), thus incentivizing the import of cheaper products from China to Malaysia—and threatening local SMEs.

Fifthly, is Alibaba opening doors to other SMEs to share its wealth, or is it getting richer, in the same way as the fictional Ali Baba, by extracting treasures from others? If we are to believe Alibaba's discourse, it is only worried about the growth and well being of foreign countries and their populations—at least rhetorically, this is strikingly similar to development organizations. Yet these fantastic aspects of the eWTP's narrative divert attention away from a central advantage that Alibaba aims to extract from the facilitation of trade with the eWTP: data. Indeed, the company's annual report conveys that we are going through a transition from an information technology-based economy to a data technology-based one (Alibaba, 2018, p. 68). In this regard, Alibaba's CEO, Zhang (2017), said, "Data is the new fuel, and it will stimulate development and widespread application of new technology. Its use in areas such as commerce, financial services and manufacturing will bring about disruption that we have not experienced before". Therefore, Alibaba's construction of a global digital infrastructure for e-commerce as a part of the digital Silk Road is neither innocent nor purely a Samaritan endeavor; rather, its key strategy is to ensure its future commercial success through the acquisition of data that are becoming the backbone of sophisticated innovations in artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and other emerging technologies. This is of the utmost importance to the company, especially if we take into account that US firms (e.g. Amazon, Microsoft, and Google) mainly control the cloud infrastructure market. However, this provision of digital infrastructure implies that countries that enter into partnership with the eWTP—unless carefully regulated—might lose sovereignty over their data and/or become digitally dependent on Alibaba, suffering from what some researchers are naming 'data colonialism' (Couldry & Mejias, 2018), which, to be fair, is a process similar to the ones that other countries are experiencing with US-based firms.

Conclusions

This article argues that, building on the BRI, the eWTP is Alibaba's counter-hegemonic discourse in terms of globalization, its radical act, which contests the existing global trade regime. The eWTP understands that to date globalization has been inherently unfair in that it has only benefitted a few transnational corporations, mainly from the US, as a result of trading goods through containers and services. Instead of following the path of protectionist policies, the eWTP proposes an inclusive vision of globalization that includes actors that were left behind in previous waves, such as SMEs, young people, and women. These actors are at the center of the discourse coalition that the political practice of the eWTP proposes: a digitally and Alibaba-enabled global digital trade infrastructure based on e-Hubs. In this sense, the eWTP is a significant case that illustrates the challenge that Chinese internet firms are making to a US-centered internet governance model.

Despite the prevalence of significant business opportunities for countries less digitalized than China in joining the eWTP, this discourse is not without contradictions. First, given its defense of free trade and reduced state regulation, it remains a neoliberal proposal for globalization, neglecting much of the global discontent pushing against such a process. Secondly, the eWTP clearly builds on the BRI, although the pretension to become a privately-led initiative will possibly collide with the Chinese state-centric internet governance model. Thirdly, it is true that the eWTP has used a logic of equivalence between SMEs, young people, and women as social identities to help with its globalization project, and yet these three categories naturally exclude others. Fourthly, those who might benefit the most from the eWTP are not entirely clear at this juncture. Finally, this article argues that the key resource that Alibaba is extracting from partner countries is data, which might enmesh them in a new type of digital dependence.

Notwithstanding, the eWTP, and more generally the digital Silk Road, may offer less technologically resourceful countries the opportunity to design hedging strategies between Chinese and USA internet firms, increasing their chances of coping better with the ongoing global processes of digitalization.

Notes

1. Inspired by Cox (1981), Glynos and Howarth (2007, p. 125) define regimes as “the broader context that structures social practices, as well as the new social structure that emerges out of hegemonic political practices”. They purposefully treat the concept as broad and to be applied at different levels of analysis, such as the case of the global trade regimes that this article analyses.
2. The reader might suspect that Alibaba pays lip service to the idea of “inclusion”, but such critical observations miss the fact that the company has already implemented several projects working towards such a goal in China. For example, Taobao villages are business clusters in rural China that sell products to wealthier urban areas through Alibaba’s e-commerce platforms. Likewise, Ant Financial has been highly successful with its microlending programs to SMEs. Ant Financial is also at the forefront of financial inclusion and innovation through its blockchain-based project for the transfer of remittances from Hong Kong to the Philippines .
3. Jack Ma’s first speeches on the eWTP, such as the inauguration of the DFTZ, only included SMEs and young people. In later speeches, women were added to the discourse coalition.

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ORCID

Maximiliano Facundo Vila Seoane  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0134-7714>

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