Preface

This book is the culmination of a four-year project examining the relationship between the World Trade Organization and human rights. A key moment in the relationship between these regimes occurred in Seattle in December 1999. Internally, key WTO Members sought to use that meeting as the launching pad for a new Round of multilateral trade negotiations. Externally, a range of critics, including influential non-governmental organizations, engaged in public demonstrations that criticized the processes and goals of the WTO. From that time, challenges as to the consistency or otherwise of the international trade law and human rights law regimes have been debated in both public fora and scholarly circles.

The politicized nature of the debate meant that much of the dialogue was polarized and rarely displayed a genuine attempt to analyze and synthesize competing arguments. Even in scholarly circles many of the criticisms directed from the trade camp towards the human rights camp and vice versa, were based on misunderstandings or at least questionable generalizations as to the norms, processes and goals of the other field. One reason for this is the historical lack of dialogue between scholars from each camp. A number of earlier worthy projects had begun to redress this. This project also aimed to do so and, to that end, a range of multidisciplinary scholars were invited to a conference in Prato, Italy, to present and debate their views, organized by the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law. This volume contains revised versions of those papers.

Mindful of the fact that we, the editors, are all legal scholars, an important aspect of the project was to attempt a more comprehensive interdisciplinary analysis of the central questions posed, namely, whether the WTO unduly interferes with the promotion of international human rights and/or fails to do enough in a positive sense to promote such rights? Questions of this nature inevitably require a deeper understanding of the philosophical and economic rationales underpinning each of the regimes and of the political and sociological insights that might be brought to bear on the way they currently operate and on the means by which the relationship between them can be optimized. The chapters in this volume range from general analyses of the way certain disciplines impact upon the debate, to case study analysis concentrating on particular arenas where the trade and human rights interface is most problematic. Because of the breadth of the topic and the legitimate differences in view
within and between each interdisciplinary field touched upon, this project can only seek to advance the debate in a meaningful way, not resolve it once and for all.

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