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**Habitus, Hegemony and Historical Blocs: Locating  
Language Policy in Gramsci's Theory of the State.**

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Studies in language ideology have, over the past decade, focused largely upon the role of language in shaping national identity through the manufacture of imagined linguistic communities. While most scholarship in this vein has been devoted to interpreting the ideological underpinnings of discourse about language, a smaller body of work, grounded in political economy rather than ideology, has brought to light the power relations upon which imagined linguistic communities are themselves predicated. Scholars focusing upon the political economy of language have looked at the ways in which the authority granted to specific linguistic varieties often indexes the power relationships between those who control that variety of language and those who do not. The vocabulary of this political economy of language has derived largely from the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Antonio Gramsci. Bourdieu's theory of the *habitus*, and Gramsci's writings on *hegemony*, have been used, often interchangeably, in order to explain the role of language in the production and reproduction of unequal power relationships in the modern state.

In this paper I reexamine both Bourdieu and Gramsci in order to highlight important differences between them. While they have both come to be perceived within the discipline as providing strong accounts of social reproduction and consent, their perceived strength has recently come to be seen as their greatest liability. Because of anthropology's focus upon social processes and human agency, theories of social reproduction are often attacked for failing to account for resistance and change. While this kind of critique accurately portrays the limitations of Bourdieu's theory of the *habitus*, I argue that Gramsci is able to transcend this dichotomy. Gramsci's analysis of *hegemony* is based upon an understanding of the modern state as a strategic

response to class conflict. He thus embodies notions of social struggle into his very model of social reproduction. After explicating this reading of Gramsci, and showing how it might be applied to the study of language policy, I turn to Bourdieu. In Kathryn Woolard's critique of Bourdieu, she attacks him for focusing too much attention upon the formal institutions of government. I take up Woolard's argument, and extend it along the lines of Gramsci's theory of the state which I counterpoise to Bourdieu's theory of government. I find that Gramsci problematizes what Bourdieu takes for granted, and that while Gramsci can rightly be said to have theory of social reproduction, Bourdieu cannot.

Those who are familiar with the anthropological literature on language policy will rightly be somewhat confused with an argument which calls for the application of Gramsci's concept of *hegemony*, since the term is already used in virtually every discussion of language policy and power. While this may be true, the term is almost always abstracted from its context within the larger body of Gramsci's work. When articulated with Gramsci's writings on political *blocs* of classes, the theory of *hegemony* comes to take on a very different meaning. The common usage of the term refers to the processes by which the class interests of the elite are universalized through institutions such as schools, churches, and the family, thus coming to be internalized by the rest of the population. This results in an argument for "false consciousness," by which the masses are duped into believing what it is that the elite wish them to believe. However, in Gramsci's historical writings there emerges an analysis in which the state is seen as being forced into cross-class alliances, forming what he terms historical *blocs* of classes, in order to diffuse class conflict.

Thus, the values which come to be universalized in the emergent state, are not simply those of the ruling class, but are also those of subaltern groups with whom the ruling class has formed political alliances.

In his article on the Southern Question, Gramsci provides a concise history of the emergence of the Italian state. He starts with the peasant uprisings just before the turn of the century, which were followed by "ten bloody years" of war. This strategy of violent oppression clearly did not work, and even backfired against the state: "the peasants of the South and the workers of the North were rising simultaneously, even if not in a co-ordinated manner, against them." It is in response to this failure that the ruling classes were forced to choose between one of two strategies. These strategies, outlined by Gramsci, both involved the formation of class alliances, or "political blocs of classes." The first choice was that of a "rural democracy" in which the ruling class would ally with the southern peasants, providing them with "a policy of tariff freedom, of universal suffrage, of administrative decentralization," and "of low prices for industrial products." The other option was that of an "industrial bloc of capitalists and workers." It was the latter model which was adopted by the Italian ruling class, which chose to maintain a strong centralized state granting concessions to the industrial workers of the North in order to control the peasants of the South. (Gramsci 1957:37).

In this brief analysis, Gramsci presents a solution to one of the central concerns of recent anthropological writings on language policy, and indeed a concern which is reflected throughout the discipline: that of human agency. Whereas much of the literature posits a false dichotomy between social reproduction on the one hand, and human agency on the other, Gramsci

presents the state as being forced to choose between different methods of diffusing class conflict. Thus, the strategies adopted by the state are the product of social struggles, and do not simply exist in opposition to them. In Johannes Fabian's Foucauldian analysis of the relationship between language and colonial power in the former Belgian Congo, he demonstrates the important ways in which the emergence of Swahili incorporated the conflicts and contradictions upon which colonial rule was based. While Foucault's notion of *regimes of power* is often used without reference to the kind of political economic specificity provided by Gramsci, Fabian's study is firmly located in the class relations which emerged in the mining region of Katanga in the East. In this region mining was the main source of wealth for the government, which had decided to mine only high grade-ore deposits. This decision meant that the government needed to recruit and maintain a very large population to work in the mines. While the mining of high-grade ore required less long-term investment in technology, it required much more labor. Preventing labor unrest among the increasingly large African population (which doubled between 1914 and 1918) was thus a major concern that underlined many of the government's policy decisions.

The continued increasing need for labor had several implications. First, because of a fear of British incursion, they needed to develop their own internal agricultural supply. This necessitated bringing in farmers from Belgium (whom they felt they could control). Secondly, it also meant bringing in more non-African workers into the mining operations. This increased influx of white workers led to the threat of South African style unionization. The government responded to this threat by limiting the foreign workers to

Belgians hired on short-term contracts, and by characterizing the union movement as non-Belgian (despite evidence to the contrary) and racist. Of course, the government was not truly concerned about racism, as Fabian points out, "racial discrimination was an issue to be used, not resolved" (Fabian 1986:106). Nonetheless, this policy led to the inclusion of blacks in higher level jobs. Another effect was the creation of a more stable environment for the workers. This meant the encouragement of the nuclear family, as well as schooling and professional training. These strategic adjustments to the constitution of the labor force had an impact upon the language policies adopted by the state. Fabian argues that the contradictions which emerged within the government's attitudes towards Swahili reflected these deep-set contradictions in the logic of colonial rule, as he lays out in the following quote:

Swahili was expected to serve three purposes, two of them more or less explicitly, one tacitly. There was, first, the need for a work jargon to replace Kitchen-Kaffir. It had to remain as little as possible above the level of individualized pidgins and kitchen-varieties, so as to be easily learned by expatriates. Second, in religious teaching and certain branches of secular education a 'pure' Swahili was thought to be the only vehicle . . . capable of transmitting Christianity and Western civilization. Both kinds were to be used, in such a manner that they remained one-way conduits for command and persuasion, and that a third function of Swahili in Katanga - namely, to serve as an effective, protective

barrier against free communication - was not endangered. (Fabian 1986:136)

The contradictions of colonial rule structured the ways in which Swahili was used. Because of this, Swahili was unable to ever truly serve its third function — that of being a one-way conduit of command and persuasion. Fabian's analysis is Gramscian in that he perceives the logic of rule as a strategic response to class struggle. In this sense, the *hegemonic* function of Swahili is not simply a mechanism of social reproduction, but serves to diffuse class conflict.

It is precisely this focus upon class conflict which is lacking from Bourdieu's analysis of social reproduction. In the remainder of my paper I draw upon Gramsci's theory of the state in order to extend Kathryn Woolard's critique of Bourdieu. Bourdieu's theory of the *habitus* represents an alternative solution to the problem of agency and social reproduction. I argue that Bourdieu ultimately conflates government with the state. Government refers to the formal institutions of political rule, whereas the state refers to the mechanisms by which the ruling historical bloc maintains its power. In Woolard's critique of Bourdieu, she draws from her classic study of language and authority in Catalonia, Spain, in order to show how Bourdieu over-emphasizes the importance of formal institutions (what I've termed government) in the creation of linguistic authority. She also argues for the importance of looking at the effects of "primary economic relations," which would seem to imply a class-based analysis of the kind I have argued we find in Gramsci and Fabian. While Woolard clearly articulates the limits of Bourdieu's governmental

analysis, her own study remains within a framework which opposes formal institutions and social reproduction on the one hand, to informal social processes and human agency on the other. By clearly distinguishing Gramsci's analysis of *hegemony* from Bourdieu's theory of the *habitus*, I hope to show how Gramsci provides a way of transcending this dichotomy.

Just as Gramsci's discussion of *hegemony* can easily be misunderstood as an argument for false consciousness unless one situates it within Gramsci's historical writings, Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* must be understood in its larger context as well. *Habitus* predisposes people to act in specific ways, but it is also generative. As John Thompson has pointed out, the *habitus* allows for a "multiplicity of practices and perceptions" (Bourdieu 1991:13). In this sense, the *habitus* is indeterminate and does not necessarily result in any specific social formation. Social reproduction only takes place through the interaction between the *habitus* and its social context. For Bourdieu, this social context can be thought of as a "market," within which various kinds of "capital" are exchanged and acquired. Most importantly, the capital from one market can often be exchanged with that of another. Thus, economic capital might literally be exchanged in order to acquire political or cultural capital. Social reproduction occurs because of the effectiveness of this market mechanism in inculcating the social dispositions which constitute the *habitus*. Formal institutions such as religion, education, family, and government serve to grant authority to specific kinds of capital, thus imbuing them with greater value. The *habitus* is thus not simply forced upon people, but is shaped by their efforts to maximize their own symbolic capital.

In Kathryn Woolard's study of language and authority in Catalonia, Spain, she found that the institutionally marginalized Catalan actually carried greater authoritative weight amongst both Catalan and Castilian speaking listeners. She used this to show the important ways in which Bourdieu's theory of symbolic power fails to conceptualize the existence of alternative linguistic markets, which are possibly even constructed in direct opposition to the norms of the official market. As she says: "it is as important to produce the correct vernacular forms in the private, local arenas of the working-class neighborhoods or peasant communities as it is to produce the official form in formal domains" (Woolard 1985:744). Thus, the symbolic value accorded to a linguistic variety in the private domain may be much higher than its value in the official domain. Woolard explains the existence of this alternative linguistic market in terms of the continued power of the Catalan bourgeoisie. Even though, within the larger Spanish state, Catalan seems to be an oppressed minority language, the fact is that within Catalonia most of the industrial work force does not speak Catalan, which is spoken mainly by the native elite (Woolard 1985:742). Thus, the authority granted to Catalan indexes the continued power of the Catalan speaking elite within Catalonia.

From her analysis, Woolard extracts two critiques of Bourdieu. The first is that he overly focuses upon formal institutions for explaining the production and reproduction of linguistic authority. Woolard shows that, despite the official language policies of the Spanish state, which have officially worked against Catalan, the language has retained its authority through informal, face-to-face relations, and an understanding by people living in Catalonia of where the real power resides. The second critique is that he underemphasizes the importance

of what she terms “primary economic relations.” She shows how class struggle has often had to ally itself with Catalan nationalism, even though many of the workers were not Catalans.

In the remainder of this paper I extend Woolard’s critique by showing how Gramsci allows us to move beyond the simple dichotomy which opposes formal structures of power to the informal processes of human agency. In Bourdieu’s discussion of political representation, he argues that the very form of representative democracy requires the creation of a professional class of politicians who must acquire political capital in order to be effective. The logic of political institutions, for Bourdieu, thus subsumes the class interests which politicians supposedly represent. The maintenance of political power rests upon the ability to maintain a distinction between professional political “producers” on the one hand, and ordinary citizens who are reduced to the status of political “consumers” on the other. In light of this discussion, it becomes clear that Bourdieu does not simply fail to focus enough attention on the informal and class-based relations which are so central to Woolard’s account. In fact, Bourdieu argues that social reproduction occurs because of the ways in which the modern state creates a distinction between political and civil society.

Although Perry Anderson has clearly demonstrated the shifting ways in which Gramsci addressed the distinction between civil society and the state, I have argued that Gramsci’s historical writings make clear the need to transcend this dichotomy and offer us a way to do so. For Gramsci, the form of representative democracy does not simply serve to diffuse class conflict, it also exists in response to it. Thus, the specific logic of rule is historically

contingent upon the forms of resistance which have emerged in opposition to the state. Whereas Bourdieu focuses upon the formal institutions of government, Gramsci emphasized the centrality of class struggle and focused upon the informal relations of historical *blocs* of classes which constitute the state. Whereas Bourdieu's theory of the *habitus* assumes that social reproduction is unproblematic, Gramsci's historical analysis of *hegemony* seeks to explain the processes by which social reproduction is made possible. In order to understand the relationship between language and power we must not simply assume power, we must explain it.

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