



# **Interdisciplinarity and the future of multilingualism research: Six things to think about**

**David Block**

**Research Professor in Sociolinguistics**

**ICREA (Institució Catalana de Recerca i Estudis Avançats)/Universitat de Lleida**




**assemblea.cat**

**POSA'T UN LLAÇ GROC  
EN SOLIDARITAT AMB  
JORDI SÀNCHEZ I JORDI CUIXART**

**#LLIBERTATJORDIS**



**DEAR TOURIST**



**Did you know balconing...?**

- Prevents gentrification
- Improves neighbours' quality of life
- Reduces the risk of heart disease
- Is LOTS of fun

**#BALCONINGISFUN**



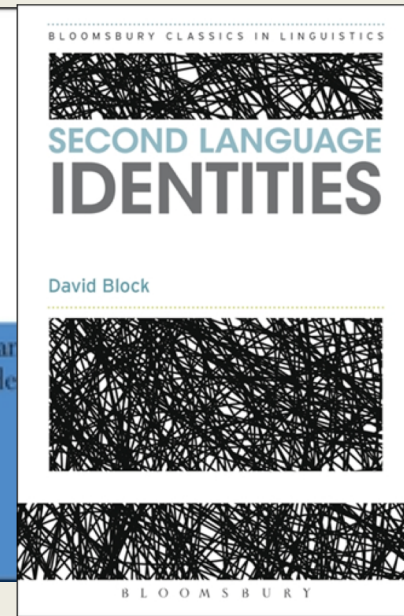
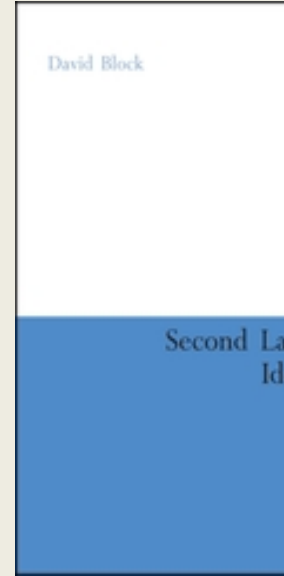
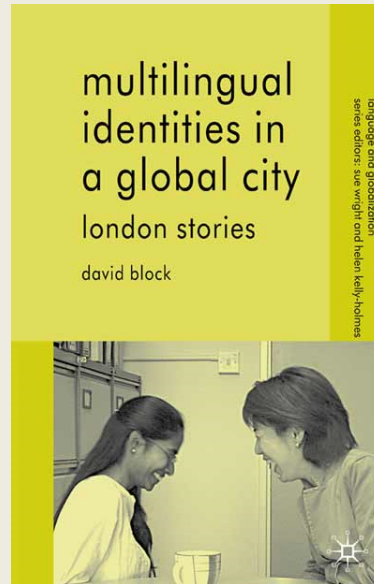
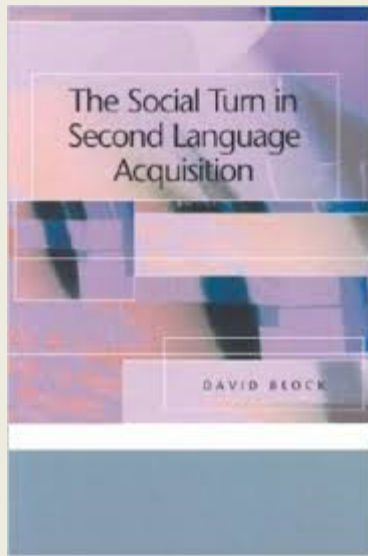
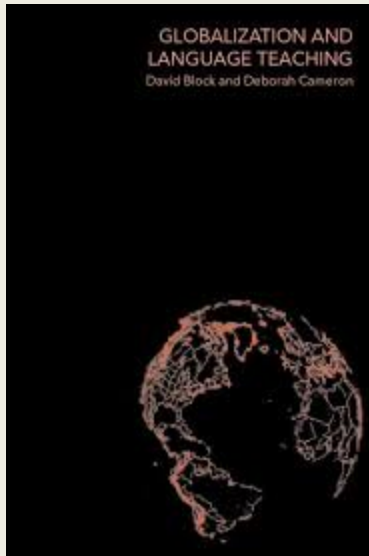
# Situating myself professionally

**Past interests** (though still present!): language teaching/learning → globalization, identity, migration, multiculturalism, multilingualism ...

**Evolving current interests:** (Marxist) political economy, neoliberalism (theories of capitalism), inequality, social class ... and post truth politics

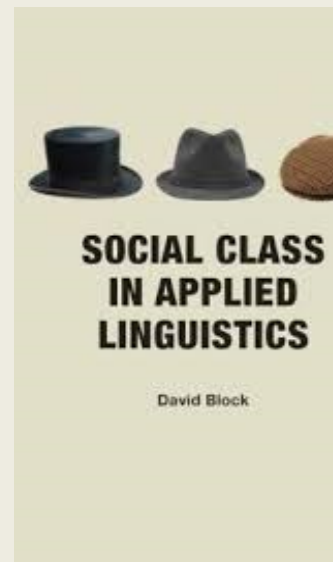
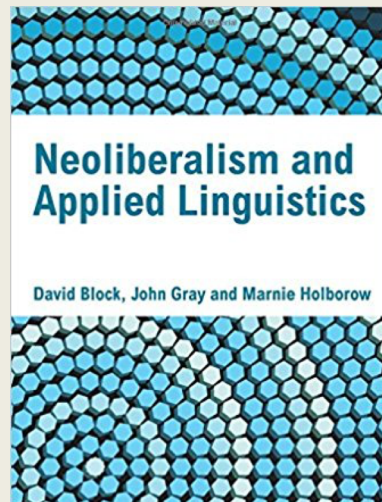


# Professional evolution via books



*Post Truth and Political Discourses*

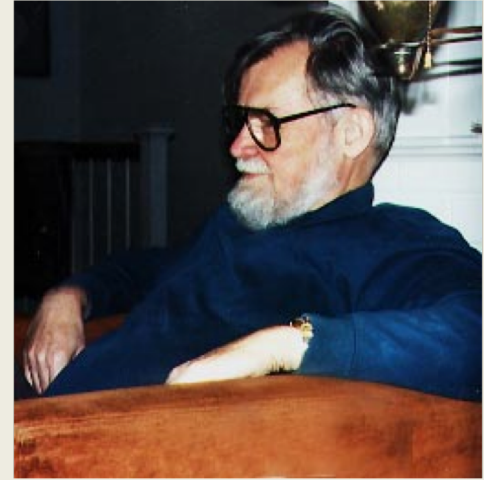
Palgrave Macmillan (2019)



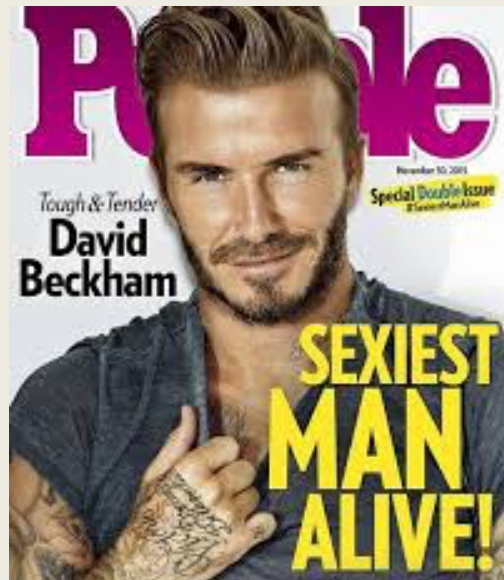
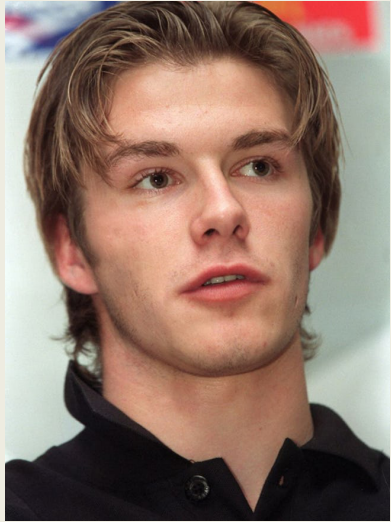


**(1) An understanding of language and communication that continues to be overly linguistic and under-semiotic in nature, a matter of ignoring research on multimodality and what its consequences are for research on language policy, language planning, language teaching and language learning**

# My long road to multimodality



# The many faces (+ bodies) of David Beckham





# Thierry Henry and the Gallic shrug



# Shrugging: It's everywhere!



**Déu n'hi do!**

Translated literally into English:

May God give it to him/her

But more likely:

I'll say

or

Really

or

Quite

or

Absolutely





## Free standing:

*A: Quin fred que fa!*

It's so cold!

*B: Déu n'hi do!*

I'll say!

## Embedded:

*Déu n'hi do com plou!*

It's really raining hard!

*Porta una camisa que déu n'hi do !*

He/she's wearing a shirt that is too much!

# So what: Multimodality/embodiment and second language learning research

Where is multimodality/embodiment in SLA research?

- SLA is about how L2 development takes place cognitive-linguistically based on input.
- Language socialization studies (e.g. Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) remind us how all language input is socially situated.
- Here we can add that it is multimodalised and embodied.
- Atkinson (2011): ‘embodied cognition’

# So what: Multimodality/embodiment and formal language learning

Classroom = little opportunity to take on multimodality/embodiment in far away contexts (but see internet).

Students can practice a service exchange in the TL, but missing are the visual backdrop, the smells, the sounds and so on that accompany the use of words.

Classrooms are sites of emergent multimodal/embodied ensembles. BUT they are ensembles quite different from what students of languages imagine in their future uses.



**The need to explore multimodality/embodiment (and other related phenomena) in language teaching.**

e.g. in ELT, how 'home' body hexis interacts with English when used as a *lingua franca* in internationalized spaces



# So what: Multimodality/embodiment and multilingualism research

Kramsch (2009): 'The multilingual subject'

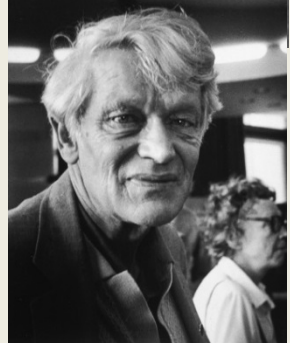
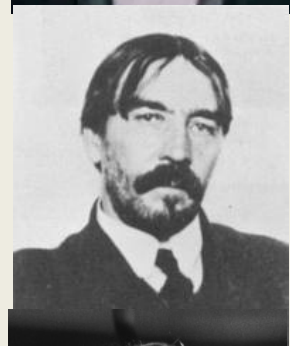
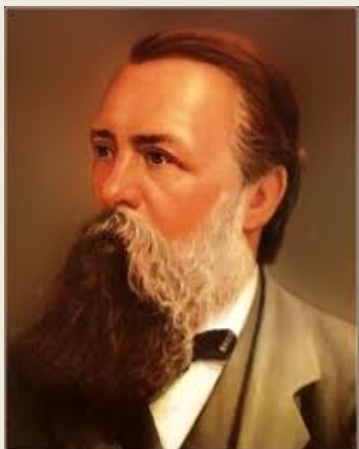
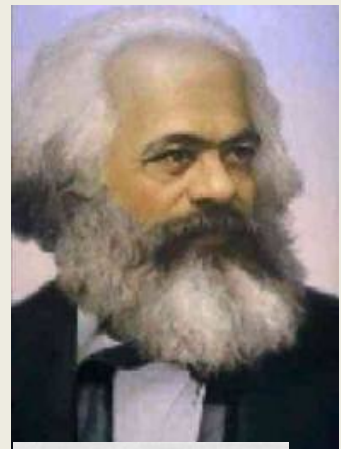
Multimodality/embodiment in the resources approach to identity in interaction (Blommaert, Rampton, Jaffe, etc.)

Bucholz & Hall (2016): 'Embodied Sociolinguistics'

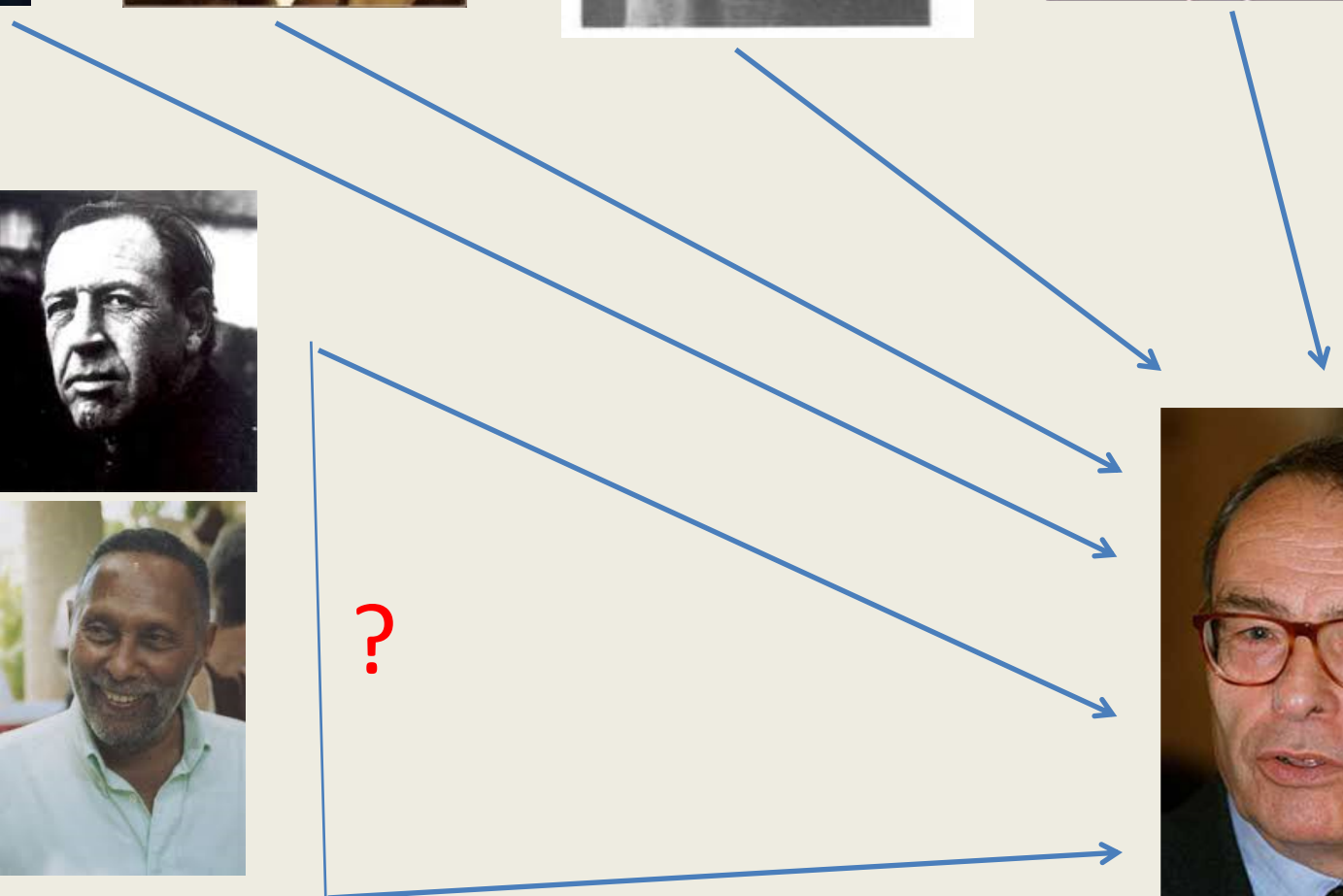
Zhu Hua, Otsuji & Pennycook (2017): 'Multilingual, multisensory and multimodal repertoires in corner shops, streets and markets'

Does this mean: code switching/translanguaging → multimodal switching/'transmodalling'?

**(2) The continued and persistent marginalisation and/or erasure of social class as a key aspect of being, which mediates and is mediated by multilingual practices**



?





# The Great British Class Survey



- launched on BBC website in January 2011
- designed by Mike Savage, Fiona Devine, *et al*
- followed earlier class surveys in Britain
- put respondents into 7 general categories: Elite; Established middle class; Technical middle class; New affluent workers; Traditional working class; Emergent service workers; Precariat

BUT, it was based on self-selected sample, leading to a bias in favour of middle and upper classes

SO, the researchers hired a survey firm (GfK) to conduct another survey based on a more representative sample of 1026 respondents

Class (GfK%/GBSC%)	Description (Savage <i>et al</i> , 2013: 230)
Elite (6/22)	Very high economic capital ..., high social capital, very high highbrow cultural capital
Established middle (25/43)	High economic capital, high status of mean contacts, high highbrow and emerging cultural capital
Technical middle (6/10)	High economic capital, very high mean social contacts, but relatively few contacts reported, moderate cultural capital
New affluent workers (15/6)	Moderately good economic capital, moderately ... poor social contacts, ... moderate highbrow but good emerging cultural capital
Traditional working (14/ 2)	Moderately poor economic capital, ... reasonable house price, few social contacts, low highbrow and emerging cultural capital
Emergent service workers (19/17)	Moderately poor economic capital, ... reasonable household income, moderate social contacts, high emerging (but low highbrow) cultural capital
Precariat (15/<1)	Poor economic capital, and the lowest scores on every other criterion

# Two ways of thinking about class



There are really two ways of thinking theoretically about **class**: either as a structural location or as a social relation. The first and more common of these treats **class as a form of stratification**, a layer in a more hierarchical structure, differentiated according to 'economic' criteria such as income, 'market chances' or occupation. In contrast, to this geological model, there is a **socio-historical conception of class** as a relation between appropriators and producers, determined by the specific form in which. to use Marx's phrase, 'surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers' (Meiksins Wood, 1995: 76)

# Class as cascading process



**Class interests**



**Class consciousness**



**Class practices**



**Class formations**



**Class struggle**



# Gérard Duménil & Dominique Lévy: managerial capitalism



## Tripolar class configurations:

**Capitalist class:** Ownership of property, means of production and finance sources and routes

**Managerial:** Managing with capitalist class  
Managing with popular classes

**Popular classes:** Broad category of different class positions (from the office to the factory to cleaning)

The **neoliberal compromise** constitutes a form of class warfare, pitting the top 10% (1% + 9%) of the population against the remaining 90%.

# Issues arising

- situating inquiry (political economy and sociolinguistics)
- epistemological stance (poststructuralism or other?)
- Structure and agency tensions
- class *in itself* and class *for itself* (Marx, 1988 [1944])
- class denial ..... class erasure
- *classing, declassing, reclassing*
- a 'psychology' of class: *class condition* (Engels, 1845); *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984); *hidden injuries* (Sennet & Cobb, 1972); *structures of feeling* (Williams, 1977)
- intersectionality - how does it work?
- recognition and/or redistribution (Nancy Fraser)

# **Class: *A constellation-of-dimensions approach***

**Economic resources:** ownership of land/dwelling, other material possessions, income, accumulated wealth

**Occupation/employment:** low skill, high skill, no skill, renter, service provider, technical factory

**Sociocultural resources:**, education, technological knowhow, social contacts and networking, societal and community status and prestige

**Behaviour:** consumption patterns, pass-times, symbolic presentation of self

**Life conditions:** relative position in hierarchies of power in society, quality of life, type of neighbourhood

**Spatial conditions:** mobility, proximity to others, dimensions and size of spaces occupied, type of dwelling

# Ways

- (1) Survey research: obtaining a general picture
- (2) Documenting how social class is 'done' through ways of communicating (or emerges from ways of communicating).
- (3) Social class as socially constructed in *talk about* - life narratives
- (4) Discourse analytic, e.g. examining how social class is constructed via *semiosis*, or meaning making drawing on a range of semiotic resources
- (5) Meta-level engagement with high-level theorizing about social class in society

Working *intersectionally*

**(3) A certain prefixal obsession that seems to have taken over research focussing on language and society in general, and multilingualism specifically (e.g. *trans*-this, *trans*-that)**



*superdiversity*

*translanguaging*

*metrolingualism*

*posthumanism*

Critiques of constructs may be about:

1. conceptualisation – internal coherence of notion, making sense
2. analytical value – explanatory capacity, allowing the telling of a here-to-for untapped story
3. effects in real-world applications – working for positive change?

(See Grin, to appear, on 2 & 3)

**(4) A generalised misunderstanding of what can/might be considered (pace Nancy Fraser) truly *transformative* with reference to actions deemed to be ‘political’, including actions falling under the general heading of language policy**

# Sad state of things from a left perspective



What remains of the radical left now operates largely outside of any institutional or organized oppositional channels, in the hope that small-scale actions and local activism can ultimately add up to some kind of satisfactory macro alternative. This left, which strangely echoes a libertarian and even neoliberal ethic of anti-statism, is nurtured intellectually by thinkers such as Michel Foucault and all those who have reassembled postmodern fragmentations under the banner of a largely incomprehensible poststructuralism that favors identity politics and eschews class analysis. Autonomist, anarchist and localist perspectives are everywhere in evidence. But to the degree that this left seeks to change the world without taking power, so an increasingly consolidated plutocratic capitalist class remains unchallenged in its ability to dominate the world without constraint. (Harvey, 2014: xii–xiii)

The “struggle for recognition” is fast becoming the paradigmatic form of political conflict in the late twentieth century. Demands for “recognition of difference” fuel struggles of groups mobilized under the banners of nationality, ethnicity, “race,” gender, and sexuality. In these “post-socialist” conflicts, group identity supplants class interest as the chief medium of political mobilization. Cultural domination supplants exploitation as the fundamental injustice. And cultural recognition displaces socioeconomic redistribution as the remedy for injustice and the goal of political struggle. (Fraser, 1995: 68)

## Nancy Fraser (1995) on redistribution and recognition



But see **bivalency**



## Actions taken to to combat misrecognition and maldistribution can be:

**affirmative**, providing “remedies aimed at inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them” (Fraser, 2008: 28).

OR

**transformative**, providing “remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework” (Fraser, 2008: 28).

# How is research on multilingualism from a range of angles situated with regard to Fraser's thinking?

Is translanguaging – as research and as pedagogical strategy- truly *transformative*? If so, how?

How might the detailed description and analysis of individuals' communicative repertoires do anything about the havoc wrought by contemporary capitalism?

What about Economics of Language research?

**(5) Researcher semi-literacy, or readings of what are identified as relevant areas of inquiry which are overly partial (in both senses of the word – incomplete and biased) and therefore lead to loose argumentation**

**Two cases:**

language commodification

neoliberalism



## Commodification of language: Examples from out there ...

... the capitalization by employers of migrant language skills ... carried out through the economic value and exchange or commodification of language and identity ...

... The commodification of English as a means to upward mobility ...

... the commodification effect on LX that the institutional discourse of the added value of standard LX has for the younger generation ...

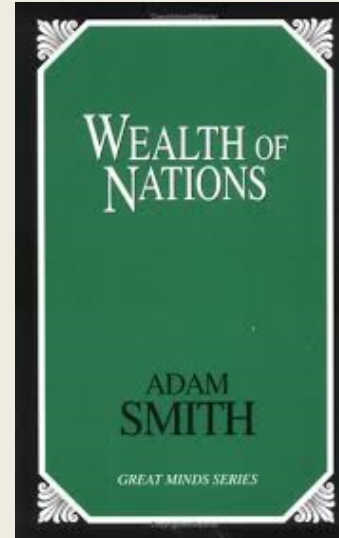


Commodification' is the expression we use to describe how a specific object or process is rendered available for conventional exchange in the market. Although the concept harks back to Marx's idea that capitalism was founded on the notion of turning work into a commodity, the word 'commodification' itself is recent, dating from the mid-1970s .... Thus, although capitalism is centrally about producing and distributing commodities, and has historically and characteristically expanded the scope of what can be turned into one, the concept as a nominalized process does not seem to appear until the process affects areas of life hitherto treated as 'public' goods and not as profit-making ventures. (Heller, Pujolar & Duchêne, 2014: 545–546)

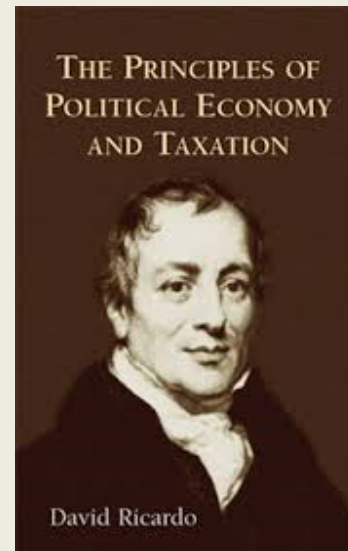
# Adam Smith and David Ricardo



1776



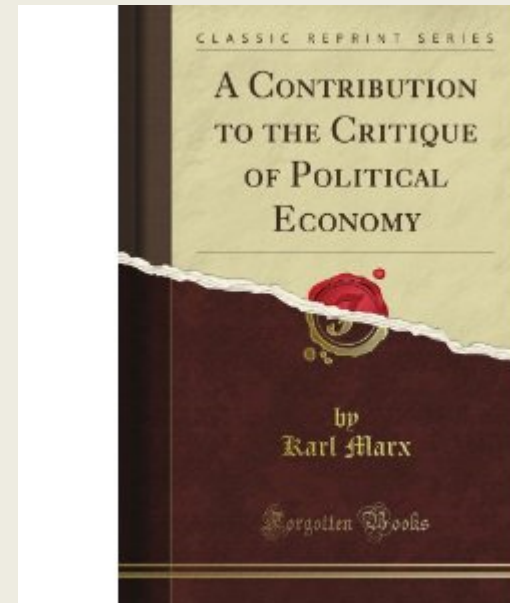
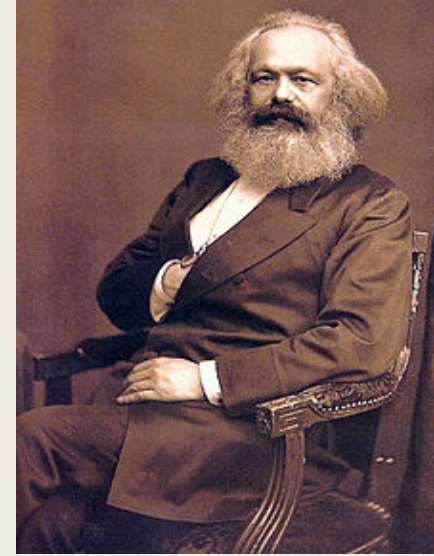
1817



It has been observed by Adam Smith, that 'the word Value has two different meanings, and sometimes expresses the utility of some particular object, and sometimes the power of purchasing other goods which the possession of that object conveys. The one may be called value in use; the other value in exchange'. ' (Ricardo, 2004 [1817]: 5)

# Karl Marx on commodity

As a use-value, **every commodity owes its usefulness to itself**. Wheat, e. g., serves as an article of food. A machine saves labor to a certain extent. This function of a commodity by virtue of which it serves only as use-value, as an article of consumption, may be called its service, the service which it renders as use value. But **as an exchange value, a commodity is always regarded as a result**; the question in this case is not as to the service which it renders, but as to the service which it has been rendered in its production. (Marx, 1904 [1859]: 34–35)





# Questions arising

If 'every commodity owes its usefulness to itself', how does this work with language?

And if , for example, '[w]heat ... serves as an article of food', what does language 'serve as an article of'?

If 'as an exchange value, a commodity is always regarded as a result' with a value commensurate with the cost of its production, what is the cost of production of language as commodity?

Or are we talking about an instance of language use and not language in its entirety (whatever that might mean) as a commodity?

But even in the case of an instance of language use, or even a 'chunk' of language use, how do we grasp the 'labour-time' involved in the production of language?

# But is this about skills, labour power or commodities?



Insofar as people sell their labor power, and insofar as the value of their labor power depends on their knowledge of particular linguistic practices, such practices become commodified ... . The commodification of language as labor, like other dimensions of the commodification of language, is nested firmly in the conditions of contemporary neoliberal capitalism ... that structure the places and options available to workers. Language as neoliberal labor further presupposes the reimagining of the person of the worker as an assemblage of commodifiable elements, i.e., a bundle of skills ... . (Urciuoli & LaDousa, 2013: 176)

# Questions arising

Are there other qualities of the individuals that are not commodifiable?

If 'the commodification of language as labor ... is nested firmly in the conditions of contemporary neoliberal capitalism', has this commodification of language then only occurred in the past 30-odd years?

If language is 'neoliberal labor', what would qualify as 'non-neoliberal labor'? Is all labour today neoliberal by definition?

Is my personal language labour 'neoliberal' as well? If not, why not?

What is neoliberalism?!

**(6) A seeming reluctance on the part of multilingualism researchers to engage with the epistemologies and ontologies that undergird their activity**

# A starting point: *poststructuralism*



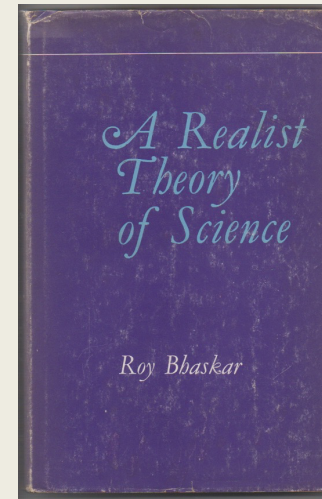
Poststructuralism is an approach to research that questions fixed categories or structures, oppositional binaries, closed systems, and stable —truths and embraces seeming contradictions [...] Poststructural researchers examine how such categories are discursively and socially constructed, taken up, resisted (the site of struggle), and so on. (Duff, 2012: 412)

# A critique

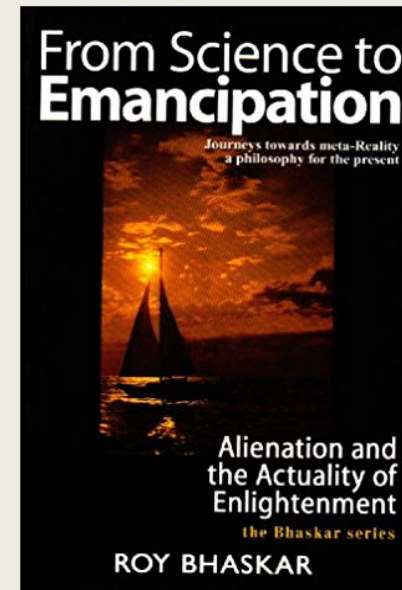
... language and identity researchers have tended to emphasize difference, relativity and pluralism over sameness, the absolute and homogeneity. They have framed identity as pastiche as opposed to something whole or integral and they have, as has already been suggested, primed individual agency over social structure. They have portrayed reality as discursively constructed (with language and culture being an integral part of this view) and they have marginalized the material, avoiding pronouncements about how the world 'really is'. (Block, 2014: 27)



# Roy Bhaskar and critical realism



Critical realism is very sympathetic to the politics of identity and difference. Where it takes exception is in suggesting that what postmodernists have done is thrown out the baby of unity with the bathwater of abstract universality. (Bhaskar, 2002: 223)



# Critique of the hermeneutic (interpretivist) tradition

The hermeneutic tradition is correct to point out that the social sciences deal with pre-interpreted reality, a reality already brought under concepts by social actors, that is, a reality *already brought under the same kind of material in terms of which it is to be grasped....*

So, ... the social sciences stand, at least in part, to their subject matter in a subject-subject (or concept-concept) relationship, rather than simply a subject-object (or concept-thing) one. ..

Where it errs is in a reduction of social science to the modalities of this relationship. ... (Bhaskar, 1998: 21)

# The 'epistemic fallacy'

... consists in the view that statements about being can be reduced to or analysed in terms of statements about knowledge; i.e. that ontological questions can always be analysed in terms of our knowledge of being, that it is sufficient for philosophy to 'treat only of the network, and not what the network describes' [Wittgenstein, 1961: 6.35]. (Bhaskar, 1975: 36)

# Critique of the positivist tradition

The positivist tradition is correct to stress that there are causal laws, generalities, at work in social life.

It is also correct to insist (when it does) that these laws *may* be opaque to the agents' spontaneous understanding.

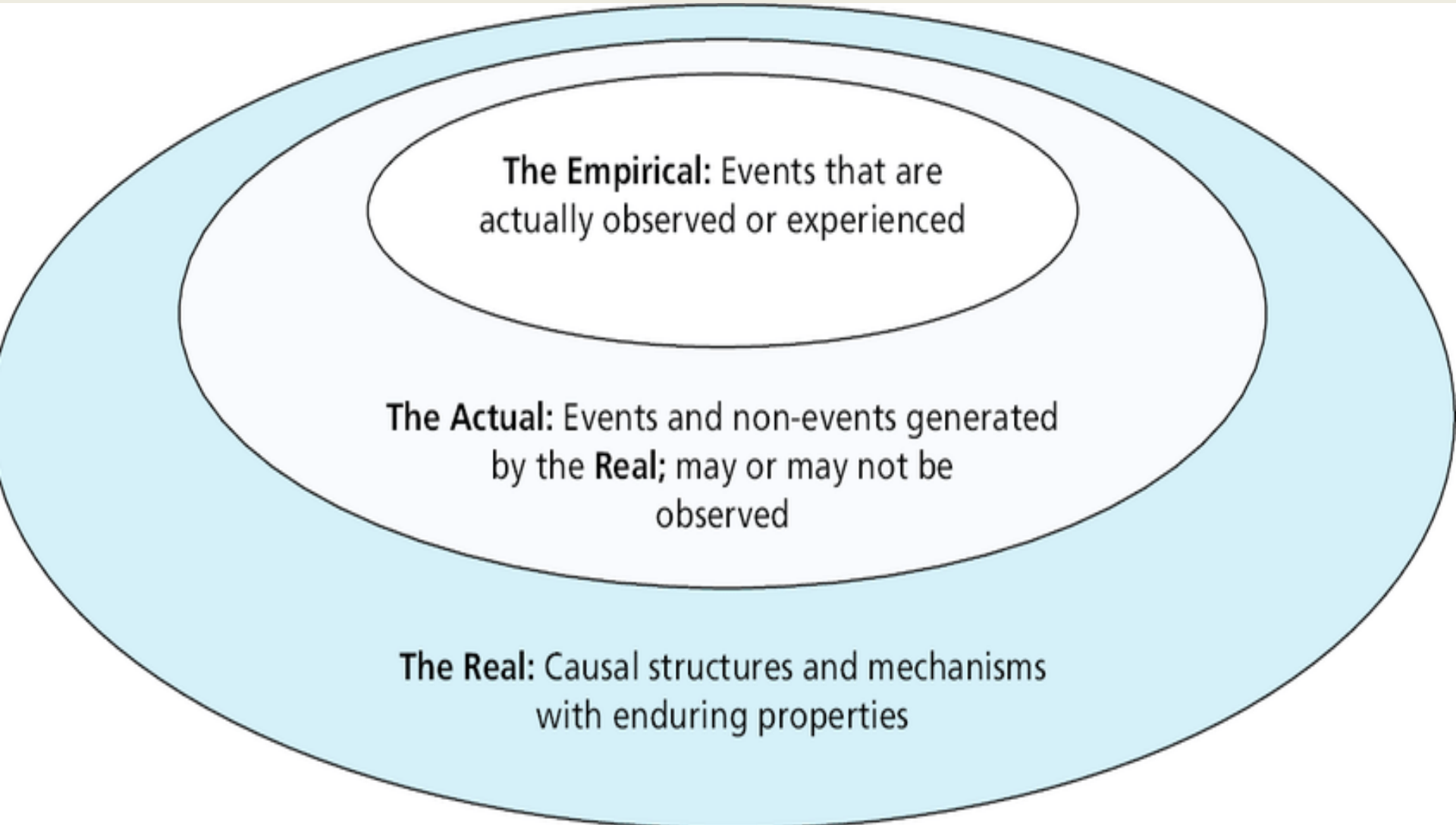
Where it errs is in the reduction of these laws to empirical regularities, and in the account that it is thereby committed to giving of the process of their identification ..., [i.e.] the direct scientific study of phenomena that only ever manifest themselves in open systems- for which orthodox philosophy of science, with its presupposition of closure, is literally useless. (Bhaskar, 1998: 21)

# Closed and open systems

We have closure when

- (1) we are able to identify all the pertinent initial conditions;
- (2) we can either isolate the generative mechanisms that theory says are implicated in the outcome, or serially keep them constant;
- (3) we can be assured that there is constancy of extrinsic findings. In this situation, the system is not only deterministic, which entails that whatever happens is caused, but that contingency has altogether been eliminated. (Manicas, 2006: 33-34)

# The *real*, the *empirical* and the *actual*





# Interdisciplinarity and the future of multilingualism research: Six things to think about

1. Differing views on language

2. Marxism and class vs. ???

3. The terminology we use

[The point of research: wanting to know / wanting to help]

4. Tensions:        recognition / redistribution  
                              transformative / affirmative

5. Reading, non-reading, *misreading*:

Whose/Who's reading?

6. Philosophy of science differences

# Gràcies/Thank you

David Block

ICREA Research Professor in Sociolinguistics

Universitat de Lleida

[dblock@dal.udl.cat](mailto:dblock@dal.udl.cat)

<http://www.icrea.cat/Web/ScientificForm.aspx?key=549>

<http://www.cla.udl.cat/fitxa.php?id=64>

<https://independent.academia.edu/DBlock>

# Relevant publications

- Block, D. (2014). Moving beyond 'lingualism': multilingual embodiment and multimodality in SLA. In S. May (ed.) *The multilingual turn: Implications for SLA, TESOL and bilingual education* (pp. 54-77). London: Routledge.
- Block, D. (2014). *Social class in applied linguistics*. London: Routledge.
- Block, D. (2015). Structure, agency, individualization and the critical realist challenge. In P. Deters, X. Gao, E. R. Miller & G. Vitanova (eds) *Theorizing and analyzing agency second language learning: Interdisciplinary approaches* (pp. pp. 17-36). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Block, D. (2017). Political economy in applied linguistics research. *Language Teaching*, 50 (1): 32-64.
- Block, D. (2018). *Political economy and sociolinguistics: Neoliberalism, inequality and social class*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Block, D. (2018). What is language commodification?. In B. Schmenk, S. Breidbach & L. Küster & (eds) *Sloganization in Language Education Discourse: Conceptual Thinking in the Age of Academic Marketization* (pp. 121-141). Bristol: Multilingual Matters,
- Block, D. (2018). The political economy of language education research (or the lack thereof): Nancy Fraser and the case of translanguaging. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2018.1466300>