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Convenor/Chair : Selma Sonntag
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The Role of States in the Advent of Global English: Commodification and Nation-Building, Overlaps and Tensions
DRAFT VERSION – work in progress

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Abstract:
During the state-building eras of the 19th and 20th centuries, language standardization and public education were directed predominantly at citizens and subjects learning official and national languages. While fostering of a domestic market and economies important to such developments, the primary aims have more often been analyzed in terms of constructing citizenship and national solidarity and obligation. In the past several decades, many nation-states have increasingly focused on teaching their workforces English as a key skill with which to participate in the ‘globalized’ economy. This situates public instruction of English through national education policies at the interstices of the needs of the capitalist economy and the requirements of state legitimacy and identity, one of the key grounds of interest in debates around the demise or transformation of the nation-state. It demands an understanding of language instruction both as being ‘commodified’ but also mobilized as a marker of class and status. This paper is a preliminary attempt to use recent readings of Antonio Gramsci’s state/civil society relationship that do not lock them purely within the nation-state, but sees both terms as not only inevitably co-mingled but also as set of relations rather than actual spaces that could be confined to the territorial boundaries of the state (Thomas 2009: esp. 167-95; Ives & Short 2013; Coutinho 2013). Moreover, Gramsci’s close attention to the inter-relations of economic production and exploitation and the politics of rule and resistance will be articulated in terms of current developments in language politics.
Introduction

Suresh Canagarajah, a prominent scholar of applied linguistics and ‘global English,’ argues that, “[t]he biggest shift under the influence of globalization discourse is that the nation-state (the basic unit of language planning hitherto) is now of reduced relevance for such purposes” (Canagarajah 2005, xx). Similarly, Saxena and Omoniyi write in their introduction to Contending with Globalization in World Englishes, “Arguably, the higher status accorded to British and American accents does not stem from the hegemony of colonisation but from their association with the new centres of the global economy” (Saxena and Omoniyi 2010, p.5).

Such generalizations, and even more extreme versions of them, seem to be common place in much of the literature concerning the rise of ‘global English’ as well as among the relatively rare political scientists who take language politics seriously and engage with the massive increase in people using English across the globe in the last several decades. (e.g. De Swaan 2001; Van Parijs 2011; Archibugi 2008). This position is in sharp contrast to the advent of national, standard languages in the 19th and early 20th centuries, which were driven substantially if not primarily due to explicit or implicit state policies especially education, cultural and other funding policies. Indeed, the dominant explanations of the advent of ‘global English’ seem to locate the causes in the ‘communicative power’ of English as a lingua franca combined with the key factors that scholars place at the centre of ‘globalization’ – increases in mobility (human and commodity) as well as technology especially the internet and other electronic advances (e.g. Crystal 2003). These
perspectives all seem to agree that while the historical connection between the rise of the European nation-state model was integrally involved in language policy, late 20th century ‘globalization’ superceded such dynamics.

The basic point of this paper is to challenge this dominant narrative. It is an initial foray into a larger project of bringing political science literature on the state into conversation with language scholarship conducted by applied and socio-linguists, linguistic anthropologists and education scholars. More than a decade ago, Selma Sonntag argued “…linguistic globalization is an important element of globalization” (Sonntag 2003, p.118). Of course, Sonntag did not posit a simplistic relationship whereby the spread of global English is synonymous with linguistic globalization which in turn is a linear and inevitable march of global capitalism that integrates the globe, as much of the academic literature and media representations implicitly suggest. Rather Sonntag contested such simplistic understandings. Her comparative approach detailed the important differences in the way the politics of global English play themselves in specific case studies of the U.S., France, India, South Africa and Nepal. She contrasts the ways in which elite classes in the U.S. and France react to English, the former using English to support its hegemony whereas the latter resist it in an attempt to retain theirs. Sonntag further distinguishes both of these cases with those of Nepal and South Africa where in difference and complex ways, non-dominant and subaltern groups have mobilized English to challenge the power of the elites. But little work has been done to extend such analysis and complement it with approaches that go beyond comparative or case-study based
research which would be needed to grapple with the inter-state system as such. And yet, especially since the economic crises of 2008 and the arrival of the ‘age of austerity,’ international relations and global political economy has been obsessed with just such questions of multipolarity (e.g. Desai 2013), the local instantiations of the crises of global capitalism and that broad central theme of political science, the relationship between the economy and the state. The important work by language scholars in this area has proceeded by looking to non-linguistically acute theories from the social sciences and applying them to issues of language (e.g. Ricento 2012; Block, Gray and Holborow 2012; Piller and Cho 2013). This, of course is an important first step, but seems to me to be limited if it remains unidirectional in terms of disciplinary exchange. If those theorizing the new contexts of the state and global capitalism remain unaware of the complexities of language politics, no amount of application of their theories can adequately grapple with the complexities of global language politics. Key features of such complexities involve the questions of the ‘native’ versus ‘non-native’ language user distinction that language scholars are questioning and undermining. It also involves the key issue of the ‘commodification’ of language (Tan & Rubdy 2008; Duchêne and Heller 2012) which easily opens the door to many questions of ‘immaterial labour,’ ‘cognitive capitalism’ or ‘the knowledge economy’ (Williams 2010) – literatures that again are often quite divorced from actual language politics however central the ‘linguistic’ is to them in the abstract. From the perspective of political science, these two concepts – nativeness of language and commodification – are linked to the fundamental
framework of the discipline, the relationship between the nation-state (the fundamental vehicle of the construction of standard, ‘native’ languages) and the economy (the realm of commodification).

One underlying motif of my project here is that while the 20th century witnessed significant influence from linguistics (e.g. Ferdinand de Saussure) and the philosophy of language (e.g. Ludwig Wittgenstein) into the social sciences at large, today language scholars look to theorists of ‘globalization’ who have little knowledge of, or interest in, language per se, nor the particularities of the changing landscape of English and its varieties and variations. The important developments of this landscape that are central to recent literature on ‘global English’ are the questioning of the ‘prestige of the mother tongue’ or the native/non-native speaker distinction and the commodification of language. My broader argument is that it is a significant problem that the key authors on globalization from a range of perspectives have little cognizance of such issues from David Held or Anthony Giddens, to Hardt and Negri, David Harvey, Ulrick Beck, Manuel Castells, Saski Sassen, etc... This paper narrows down the terrain by focusing on just a few debates especially within international relations theory and international political economy concerning the relationships between the logic of the inter-state system and that of global capitalism. It tries to show how such debates are hampered in being able to provide the richness required to frame the key questions that scholars of global language politics are engaged in. I then turn to recent readings of Antonio Gramsci,
especially concerning the concepts of the state and civil society to provide a more suitable framework, or set of considerations.

Before turning to such examples, a few more comments are in order about the general terrain of such debates. Just as there are many critics of the globalization thesis, there are also language scholars who understand the continued relevancy of the state as significant in explaining the rise of global English and its political implications. The most prominent and clear example of this is the work of Robert Phillipson, who casts the state, or at least the specific states of England and then the U.S., as the major actors in the advent of ‘global’ English (Phillipson 1992; Phillipson 2010). Other analyses point to a continued state involvement in the use of state policy concerning language issues.

Thus, there is an echo here between debates concerning global English and those concerning globalization. There is a similar dichotomy between either the nation-state being substantially irrelevant to the rise of ‘global English’ in the context of ‘globalization’ or the notion that specific states, most notably Great Britain and then the U.S. but also Canada, Australia and New Zealand, are the major actors in the spread of English but in their own policies concerning official and national languages, immigration and especially education policies are central to the spread of English has an interesting echo in debates occurring in international relations and global political economy. While such debates in political science or sociology at large, or more specific debates around international relations and global political economy play little heed to language issues, the question of whether
the nation-state is declining in importance and that its heyday has been superceded by globalization has been countered by various analyses of economic globalization as the outcome of geopolitical competition among states, where states remain dominant and central actors.

**Logics of the State and Global Capitalism in International Political Economy**

Due to the immensity of the literature on such issues, I will narrow the field for this paper by focusing on way Alex Callinicos has divided up the conceptual terrain within IR and IPE.¹ In his lead article to a special issue of the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* which was then expanded into an edited collection, Callinicos outlines three positions concerning the relationship between global capitalism and geopolitical conflict of the interstate system. These three positions are determined by how they relate the interstate system that works on the logic of geopolitical competition with the dynamics of global capitalism.

The first position that Callinicos summarizes sees the economic logic of global integration as superceding the historical power of geopolitical competition. This position includes an array of scholars such as William Robinson and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who provide some version of the thesis that geopolitics

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among the leading capitalist states is now obsolete, and global capitalism structures political relations. For example Robinson argues that there is a transnational (capitalist) state, or structures that function as such, and transnational classes. Robinson never addresses in what language such transnational classes communicate or if translation plays a central role. But if he were to draw on the work of De Swaan, Archibugi or Van Parijs, he could presume the business classes would communicate primarily and increasingly in English and perhaps a certain but decreasing reliance on translation. Callinicos notes that “Hardt and Negri are perfectly clear that capitalist reproduction needs state capabilities, they just deny that these capabilities are now exercised by sovereign territorial states, as opposed to the transnational political networks bending different actors—states certainly but also transnational corporations, international institutions, NGOs, etc—that they claim to be constitutive of the new ‘imperial sovereignty’” (Callinicos 2010, p.17).

The second position more or less reverses the relationship between political and economic power, although still collapsing the two. Callinicos takes the work of Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin to represent this position. They argue that the U.S. hegemony since World War Two has subordinated all other major geopolitical conflicts, and that capitalists have successfully used the state to usher in global, neoliberal processes that have greatly enhanced their power and capital. Mapping this position onto language issues is a little crude, but there are obviously parallels with Robert Phillipson’s approach discussed above.
The third approach, which Callinicos himself occupies, along with David Harvey, Chris Harmon and others, maintains that the logic of capitalism is analytically separate from the logic of geopolitical competition. Callinicos argues that historically the origins of capitalism and the international state-system are distinct. Through a reading of Marx’s *Capital*, he also argues that the alliances of capitalists and state managers are historically variable, and thus, so too is the relations between the two logics of competition, geopolitical and capitalist. This position is intriguing here precisely because the ‘logic’ of the nation-state in terms of language hinges mostly on standardized languages being central to identity, patriotism and citizenship, whereas the ‘logic’ of capitalism relates to language(s) as skills of a workforce.

Inserting the politics of language and the rise of ‘global English’ in particular into this framework does not unambiguously strengthen any of these three sides, despite some vague parallels I noted above. However, it does reveal some of the issues at stake and some of the problems with under-theorized conceptions of language. The transnational state theories have some affinity with the most common mainstream analysis of ‘global English.’ Obviously, no active transnational state has pursued the spread of English in the manner that national-states have often attempted to ‘standardize’ a national language (or languages) as part of nation-building projects. But scholars like David Crystal argue that because of ‘globalization’ including specifically technology enabling greater mobility of people and information a global language is ‘needed.’ And while he also discusses the long
history of English within colonialism and then as being supported by U.S. economic and military might, his narrative is that the world now needs a ‘global language’ and English is the prime and only real candidate (Crystal 2003, pp.7-14, for a critical discussion see Ives 2010, esp. p.522). Abram De Swaan uses a different more complex analysis involving a combination of Wallersteinian world-systems theory with rational choice theory to argue that the spread of English must be understood as an “unintended consequences of a myriad of individual decisions (and non-decisions, resignation and compliance) ....” (De Swaan 2001, p.186). If the IPE scholars who hold to the transnational state thesis would consider language, they may come up with an alternative account, but theirs seems fully complementary with this mainstream approach which ultimately favors the notion of language as fundamentally an instrument of communication, and which I have criticized precisely from a Gramscian perspective (Ives 2006).

But those like Robert Phillipson who argue that ‘global English’ is the more direct result of the history of British colonialism, followed by U.S. imperialism and a foreign policy that explicitly utilized the support and spread of English throughout the globe would seem to run more parallel with the second school of thought, of U.S. hegemony (Phillipson 1992). Not unlike Panitch and Gindin, Phillipson focuses on the role of the spread of English within British colonial rule and, more persuasively, as an aspect of U.S. foreign policy directly related to cultural, economic and military pre-eminence. Again, I am not trying to force a tight mapping of unstated positions,
but rather uncover where these different theories of capitalism and geopolitics may place the rise of global English were they forced to address it.

The third school that posits two analytically separate logics for capitalism and geopolitics presents the most ambiguous or difficult position into which the politics of ‘global English’ could be addressed. On one level, the diverse but comparable processes of national language standardization in various countries especially from the 18th century onwards would seem to fit non-economic state logics of the creation of citizens, homogeneity and ideologies of nationalism together with the project of creating national markets (with consumers who spoke a standard language but where language was not commodified). However, the ‘realist’ dynamic of geopolitical competition for power among states that Callinicos is interesting in that it does not fit so well with questions of language politics. The type of differentiation effected by Noah Webster between American English and English English (perhaps at the heart of Braj Kachru’s World Englishes approach) is not the type of geopolitical competition that Callinicos has in mind. And the commodification of language learning, especially English, as an industry would be viewed as a separate logic following the demands of the global capitalist market. On the other hand, as Callinicos admits, such theorization is unavoidably at a very high level of abstraction (Callinicos 2010, pp.23-24), it is unclear where it would take us in terms of more empirical research which would have to be attuned to the specific histories of various languages and their relation to English which differs widely across the globe. My hope is that this discussion can lead to a better appreciation of
the contributions of Gramsci’s writings on language politics at both this high level of abstraction but also a more pragmatic and politically effective level of actual language practice especially in order to insist that the advent of ‘global English’ is indeed a salient development in a thorough analysis of the state-system and global capitalism.

One of the many responses to Callinicos’ article was Adam Morton’s discussion of Gramsci and his theory of passive revolution. Morton challenges Callinicos’ overly stark framing of the debate which over emphasizes the “radically distinctive” nature of his two logics argument in being able to incorporate inter-state conflict into a Marxist framework. Morton does this by focusing on Gramsci’s version of the theory of uneven and combined development which goes hand in hand with an insistence on more historically specific analysis with greater focus on class formation and alliances within and among states (Morton 2010, pp.215-30). It is this framing of how the relationship between global capitalism and the state-system that I think is most promising for pursuing the politics of global English.

Gramsci, the State and Civil Society

Selma Sonntag concludes from her study of the local politics of global English, discussed above, that, “In negotiating global boundaries through language politics, the State inevitably negotiates its own definition and that of civil society as well”

While Sonntag does not reference Antonio Gramsci here, she discusses his concept of hegemony, the concept most influential in general and particularly among language scholars, earlier in the book. But here she intimates a very Gramscian (as opposed to liberal) understanding of the concepts of state and civil society that I argue are necessary in order to engage more thoroughly with contemporary language politics and global English. As Sonntag notes, the relationship between state and civil society is not that of a static opposition such as the common liberal definitions where ‘civil society’ is specifically defined as ‘non-governmental’ (see Buttigieg 1995). But rather, for Gramsci, civil society is always inter-related with the state, as Sonntag intimates. Moreover, as recent scholarship on Gramsci emphasizes, while he often uses the term ‘the state’ in a narrower fashion which at times he described as ‘political society,’ he also develops the idea of an ‘integral state,’ ... (See Gramsci 1975, p.455-65; Thomas 2009, pp.190-5; Coutinho 2013). Indeed, Thomas argues, tracing Gramsci’s discussion of ‘civil society’ back through Hegel’s *bürgerliche Gesellschaft*, that for Gramsci, like Hegel, ‘state’ and ‘civil society’ (one could also mention the family) cannot be considered as distinct locations or regions but are “geographically coextensive with each other; each sphere is ‘superimposed, upon or ‘subterranean’ to the others” (Thomas 2009, p.176). Similarly, Carlos Nelson Coutinho describes Gramsci’s conception of ‘civil society’ as “the sphere of mediation between the economic infrastructure and the state in the narrow sense” (Coutinho 2013, p.77). Gramsci’s development of the state/civil society relationship then, does not lead down the path to the concept of
'global civil society' that, as critics have argued, tends to flatten out social movements and subaltern political struggles around the world. It does not divorce 'civil society' in its 'global' form, from 'the state' that has no global form. It does not raise those embarrassing questions of in what language and languages does 'global civil society' or its cousin, the global public sphere (or spheres) operate.

The point is not to radically reject previous understandings of the nation-state as maintaining at least an ideal territorial component over which the state has sovereignty, but to suggest that both the 'state' and 'civil society' describe human relationships or modes of power. The implications of adopting such an approach to the state are beyond the scope of this paper, but it immediately enables us to begin to theorize how the consent to learn a language, such as English, can be understood as an aspect of 'civil society,' 'free' association not dictated by state policy per se, but at the same time imbricated precisely in the frameworks of state policies both formally in terms of official or national language designations, minority language rights, governmental services, etc... but also in terms of education, immigration and employment policies. But the issues here involves how one goes beyond such analyses as 'domestic' or specific country-cases even if they are highly cogniscent of the 'international' factors, whether economic or other non-economic questions of prestige and cultural validity.

With my co-author, Nicola Short, I have recently critiqued the idea that Gramsci had little to say about international relations (e.g. Femia 2005) or that his concepts including hegemony and civil society need to be translated or adapted
from the domestic level to the global level in order to address current questions of globalization. Rather, we demonstrated how Gramsci consistently understands the construction of the Italian nation-state in particular and all nation-states in general as occurring on the terrain of global politics (Ives and Short 2013). We provided a detailed look at the centrality of Gramsci’s analyses of international institutions like the Roman Catholic Church and the Rotary Club to the development of his key categories including the state, civil society and hegemony.

It is this conception of the state and civil society coupled with Gramsci consistent attention to language politics that makes his approach much more promising than others such as the three outlined above. While this proposition requires much more detailed theoretical development and most importantly more empirical application, it initially suggests that we can neither ignore the obvious continued role of states and especially education policy nor deny or underestimate the massive impact that the spread of global capitalism has in the unprecedented historical use of English and varieties of English across the world.

**Works Cited**


