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Review of *Social Class in Applied Linguistics* by David Block

Frank Bramlett

University of Nebraska at Omaha, fbramlett@unomaha.edu

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Book Review by Frank Bramlett

Social Class in Applied Linguistics by David Block. London, England: Routledge, 2014. Pp. Xiv + 201.

As Block writes in the prologue and the epilogue, the book is primarily about *erasure*; his motivation for writing the book is to highlight “the substantial and sometimes complete erasure of social class in applied linguistics research due to the ways in which applied linguists frame their discussions of issues such as identity, inequality, disadvantage and exclusion” (pp. ix–x). Overall, Block achieves his goal of illustrating the widespread absence of social class in applied linguistics; however, the book itself makes some missteps in exploring the very construct it claims as its focus.

The book is divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 is an exploration of how Block understands class: his formative years in Texas, the rise of neoliberalism in the global marketplace, and political economy and critical realism. There are two main reasons for this chapter: (1) to describe Block's own experience living in an environment that includes working class and poor people, and (2) to demonstrate his credentials for writing a book on social class.

Chapter 2, “What is Social Class?,” is the longest and most involved of all the chapters, surveying theories about class, beginning with Marx and Engels, continuing with Durkheim and Weber, and focusing largely on Bourdieu. Block explains Bourdieu's notions of *capital*, *habitus*, and *field*, and prefers Bourdieu over others. The chapter ends with Nancy Fraser's (2003) work on “recognition” and “redistribution” (pp. 67–68). Block gets to linguistics in Chapter 3, “Social Class in Sociolinguistics,” in which he critically examines Labov, Trudgill, and Bernstein, with Bourdieu's critiques overlaid. Also included are the Milroys, Heath, and Rampton, and the notions of *repertoire*, *style*, and *stance*.

Chapter 4, “Social Class in Bi/Multilingualism Research,” explores a range of issues, mostly in English linguistics and mostly regarding immigrant communities in the United States and the United Kingdom. In this chapter, there is a germ of insight into Block's thinking: he reviews Ofelia Garcia's (2008) work and discusses the complexities of working-class and middle-class bilingualism. The chapter ends with a discussion of English as academic capital in South Korea and India (pp. 138–142). Chapter 5, “Social Class in Second Language Acquisition and Learning,” differs from previous ones; Block focuses largely on prior research that explores class. In part, it rehearses Block's earlier work in Barcelona (pp. 149–154) (Block, 2007) and Bonny Norton's (2000) research (pp. 155–157), among others. The epilogue revisits the notion of *erasure*, continuing the lament that so much applied linguistics has excluded even a basic look at the effects social class may have on people and their lived linguistic experiences.

While the book accomplishes its goals of pointing out weaknesses in applied linguistics and the treatment of class, Block commits a very important and consistent erasure of his own. In the prologue, Block makes a very telling mistake: he admits his own class prejudice while also using the term “redneck” uncritically (p. 6), and explains how, in his experience, many working-class and middle-class Texans “fell into the category of ‘redneck’” (p. 21, note 5). Any scholar of Marxism or of social class should recognize the mistake of using the term *fall into*. Block should know that racist and classist terms

are used to categorize others. In other words, working-class and poor Texans do not *fall into* the category of *redneck*; instead, they are actively placed there by people with prejudices. Block has removed agency here, which undercuts the purpose of the book significantly.

This unfortunate use of *redneck* symbolizes a larger act of erasure that surprised me. Block does not with any consistency address the English-speaking working class and their experiences with bilingualism, multilingualism, or second language acquisition or learning. Admittedly, he does cite a small number of studies, like Kinginger (2004), but much of the book embodies what Block terms “passive class prejudice,” defined as an “embrace of the invisibility of ... middle class habitus and class position” (p. 7).

Despite this broad erasure of certain aspects of class, the book succeeds because Block rightly identifies the absence of a sustained engagement with social class. It posits very strongly that class must be included for a robust understanding of applied linguistics. The work yet to be accomplished is a sustained look at white working class communities in the United States, the United Kingdom, and in Europe generally. The notions of class and race/ethnicity are intertwined of course, but a treatment of class must look with clear eyes to develop the vision sufficiently.

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