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# Rhetoric and Capitalism: Rhetorical Agency as Communicative Labor

Ronald W Greene, *University of Minnesota - Twin Cities*



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## Rhetoric and Capitalism: Rhetorical Agency as Communicative Labor

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Ronald Walter Greene

It is a commonplace to describe rhetorical agency as political action. From such a starting point, rhetorical agency describes a communicative process of inquiry and advocacy on issues of public importance. As political action, rhetorical agency often takes on the characteristics of a normative theory of citizenship; a good citizen persuades and is persuaded by the gentle force of the better argument. More radical visions of argument might include strikes, sit-ins, and boycotts in the rhetorical arsenal of good citizenship, and some might even flirt with violence as rhetorical action. This model of rhetorical agency requires a translation of the conceptual apparatus of rhetoric and its alignment with the problematics of democratic theory and actually existing democratic regimes. Classical models that hoped to harness rhetorical agency to the making of the “orator-statesman” (*sic*) must reimagine political participation in terms of publics and counterpublics, social movements, electoral campaigns, communication media and technologies, as well as supra- and sub-national institutional settings. As the classical norms of citizenship rub against (post) modern realities, a permanent anxiety over the meaning and potential of rhetorical agency seems destined to be lodged in the critical imagination of rhetorical studies. If politics today is, in Jodi Dean’s words, “a domain of financially mediated and professionalized practices centered on advertising, public relations, and the means of mass communication,” then actually existing rhetorical agency manifests itself in efforts to “raise the money, buy the television time, register the domain names, build the website, and craft the accessible, user-friendly, spectacular message” (2003, 96).

If we recognize Dean’s description of the political as an accurate description of the rhetorical situation today, rhetorical studies is left with three strategies: It can refashion a deliberative vision of rhetorical agency into a normative ideal for critiquing the structural conditions (capital, me-

dia concentration) of political participation. Second, it can enlarge the field of normatively acceptable ways and means of political participation, for example, by embracing the more spectacular politics associated with visual and body rhetorics. Finally, rhetorical studies can work on the “demand” side and design new strategies and tactics for activating the rhetorical participation of citizens, for example, by encouraging the creation of communicative norms necessary for reinvigorating voluntary and civic organizations. However, while each of these approaches provides a research agenda, none of them gets at the root cause of the anxiety over agency: the attachment of rhetorical agency to a vision of political change. The anxiety over agency pushes rhetorical critics and theorists into becoming moral entrepreneurs scolding, correcting, and encouraging the body politic to improve the quality and quantity of political participation.

The purpose of this paper is to offer an escape route from theorizing rhetorical agency as a model of political communication.<sup>1</sup> In opposition to a political-communicative vision of rhetorical agency, this paper suggests a different materialist ontology, one that imagines rhetorical agency as a form of living labor. I will argue that rhetorical agency belongs to the domain of communicative labor, a form of labor increasingly necessary to the workings of contemporary capitalist production. In other words, I want to replace a political-communicative model of rhetorical agency with a materialist-communicative model. To highlight the similarities and differences between the two models, I will focus on how the interface between politics, communication, and economics plays out in the Marxist tradition of rhetorical studies. I will organize this tradition into two sections: the first, represented by James Aune, advocates a hermeneutic approach to rhetorical agency, and the second, represented by Dana Cloud, argues for imagining rhetorical agency as a class-based social movement. By focusing on the work of my comrades, the paper risks being received as a “left sectarian” polemic.<sup>2</sup> As I will demonstrate in each section, the problem with these two approaches has less to do with Marxism and more to do with how they turn to hermeneutics and social movements to imagine rhetorical agency in the idiom of communication theory. In the third section of the paper I will resituate rhetorical agency into a materialist ontology of labor and capitalist production. In so doing, I will argue that rhetorical agency can no longer mediate the relationship between politics and economics, because politics and economics are no longer unique domains of social action. As an alternative to a model of political communication, I will provide a model of communicative labor that investigates rhetorical agency by discussing its relationship to the creation of value.

## Hermeneutics: Rhetorical agency as citizen-orator

James Arnt Aune remains one of the few historians of U.S. public address arguing for a philosophical and political encounter between rhetorical studies and Marxism (Aune 1994). He does so in order to highlight the class struggle as a primary democratic antagonism. Hence, Aune argues that rhetorical critics should emphasize “the workplace as a site of oppression” in order to narrate a materialist public address history (148). From this perspective, Aune argues that speakers primarily exist as representatives of a class-based politics engaged in strategic communication to challenge their exploitation. While the effort to document the class struggle in the renaissance of public address remains small, Aune’s approach aligns with those interested in doing work on the rhetorical struggle over the symbolic resources and cultural forms of the United States. In other words, regardless of his critical affiliation, Aune shares an approach to rhetorical agency that permeates the ongoing effort to document and evaluate the rhetorical dynamics of U.S. political history.

Aune’s materialism is a red republicanism and is deeply wedded to a hermeneutics-inspired, classically humanist vision of rhetoric. Therefore, Aune’s materialism brings with it a healthy respect for communal traditions and is nationalistic in its desire to recover the interest of the nation-state to regulate the flow of capital in a more social democratic way. What difference does Aune’s nationalist-inspired rhetorical hermeneutics make for the study of rhetorical agency? Aune attempts to correct the rhetorical mistakes of Marxist theory by harnessing the class struggle to a Gadamarian vision of rhetoric. In this spirit, Aune writes that “the fundamental stance of rhetoric is best captured by Hans George Gadamar’s discussion of the concepts of *Bildung* (self-formation-cultivation), *Sensus communis* (a community’s traditional public values), Judgment (that good sense that derives from civic solidarity), and taste (adaptation to the aesthetic sense of the community) as parts of the humanist tradition” (Aune 1994, 5). This humanist turn is important, because it de-emphasizes the idea of the working class as a figure of collective agency to make room for the importance of the classical figure of the “citizen-orator” capable of persuading a community to mobilize for social change. The magic bullet in such an approach to social change is a charismatic leader capable of the rhetorical transfiguration and transvaluation of the democratic traditions of the United States. In this way, rhetorical agency becomes less associated with speech-acts and more associated with the fabrication of the *phronimos* (Aune 1994).

I want to focus on Aune's turn to a hermeneutic vision to guide rhetorical agency to highlight how this vision of political communication partakes in a modern history of aesthetic self-fashioning associated with cultivating national citizens. While Aune and many of his allies advocate the study of rhetorical practices to form citizens, the rise of German Romanticism alongside the nineteenth-century nation-state nominated literature as the key mechanism for inventing a new ethical science of citizenship. This ethical science would focus on the process of reading as an interpretive art and find in the act of textual criticism a new a process of forming nationally self-conscious citizens. As Toby Miller reports:

We can see a connection in contemporary claims made for the humanities to Friedrich Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, born out of a sense of a radical separation of the people from their traditions. . . . From Schiller's time on, citizens were to have their tastes and natures formed under the sign of the *Bildung*. . . . From Herder on, to know one's local literary history was to affirm one's national identity. And after Taine, this was also the conduit to a sense of the public. (1993, 72–74)

It is not difficult to make the necessary rhetorical substitutions. Contemporary rhetorical studies finds a situation whereby the people are divorced from their rhetorical and cultural traditions; the study of this rhetorical tradition can inculcate a new sense of political agency by providing the symbolic resources and political role models for critical imitation and emulation. Yet, the marriage of civic humanist rhetoric to a modern hermeneutics risks creating blind spots to the modern history of citizen formation.

Ian Hunter (1988) documents how the institutional history of modern aesthetics includes the incorporation of Romanticism into the educational apparatus of the nation-state as a unique knowledge necessary to guide the act of reading. The humanities were able to establish their legitimacy and productivity by creating institutions of popular schooling and deploying a new cadre of experts dedicated to forming the character of the nation's citizens. From this historical direction, Aune's hermeneutic turn is an attempt to resituate rhetorical education and oratorical performance as part of the aesthetic mechanisms required for creating nationally self-conscious citizens. Unfortunately for Aune's class sympathies, the students that rhetorical intellectuals reach in the postmodern university often aspire to be on the wrong side of the class struggle. More importantly, an appreciation of the relationship between aesthetics and modern education makes visible how Aune's rhetorical hermeneutics partakes in its own class his-

tory associated with the emergence of an intellectual knowledge class and the social reproduction of the ruling class.<sup>3</sup>

Aune's nationalist-inspired rhetorical hermeneutics demands a respectful stance toward public values at the same time as those public values are made manifest in a history of class struggle. The political risk of Aune's nationalism is that he leaves in place the theoretical and practical possibility that international class alliances (both horizontal and vertical) might be blocked by the articulation of national traditions. While critics have challenged Aune's nationalism and his desire to privilege the class struggle,<sup>4</sup> I want to emphasize that his nationalism is also partly a consequence of his hermeneutic vision of rhetorical agency. In other words, his nationalism is more than a political accident that can be corrected by advocating a more transnational politics of class solidarity; rather it is an effect of articulating the political agency of working-class struggles to a hermeneutic vision of rhetoric. However, I do want to highlight how his emphasis on the workplace as a site of oppression redeems an important materialist reason for rhetorical agency.

Aune's defense of class-based politics begins with Erik Olin Wright's distinction between exploitation and domination (Wright 1984). For Aune and Wright, exploitation is a more important concept than domination because domination does not necessarily imply that the interests between dominant and subordinate are diametrically opposed. In contrast, a refurbished idea of exploitation highlights how the interests of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are antagonistic. The idea of exploitation as antagonistic interest means that for the bourgeoisie to be the bourgeoisie requires not only the oppression of the proletariat but also the appropriation of the effort (labor) of the proletariat. Thus, for Olin Wright, "exploitation requires both economic oppression and appropriation of at least part of the social surplus by the oppressor" (Wright 1984, 384–85). Yet, for Aune's hermeneutic nationalism to have any force, the economic exploitation of the working class must be rhetorically translated into a class-based politics that challenges this exploitation in and through the "symbolic traditions" endemic to the (U.S.) nation-state. The risk of such a rhetorical nationalism is its privilege of national economic interests over an investigation into the international division of labor. Moreover, while Aune briefly acknowledges the need to account for the sexual division of labor, there remains the conceptual problem associated with the racialization and "ethnicization" of the division of labor. As labor historians become more sensitive to how the division of labor is itself organized around race, gen-

der, and nationality, the cultural elements of domination (racism, sexism) are not so easy to disentangle from an “economic” emphasis on exploitation.<sup>5</sup> It is conceptually incoherent to revive the category of exploitation without also deconstructing the cultural politics of “rhetorical nationalism” implied in Aune’s hermeneutically inspired class politics. To do otherwise is to leave unaccounted for how economic exploitation works across nation-states; in other words, it leaves the international division of labor untouched. The international division of labor is one such place whereby economic exploitation works in and through cultural domination and not simply through one’s location in a class structure. The challenge for a hermeneutic vision of rhetorical agency is to provide an answer to its tendency to frame exploitation in terms of national economies and traditions.<sup>6</sup>

What is worth redeeming, however, is the workplace as a site of exploitation. But to do so, requires that class-based politics be refigured away from national traditions and hermeneutic reading strategies and toward struggles over the appropriation of “social surplus.” The social surplus of production suggests two materialist moves regarding the category of value. First, the appropriation of social surplus speaks to an economic idea of value. An economic idea of value highlights the process in which capital extracts surplus value from labor. In this economic sense, surplus value concerns the social product produced by labor above that required for labor’s reproduction. The method of exploitation resides in the ability of capital to command labor to produce surplus value. The second insight about economic value is that it does not exist independently of cultural dynamics of representation. Surplus value is, at the same time, a representation/sign of exploited labor. As Spivak writes, “According to Marx, under capitalism, value, as produced in necessary and surplus labor, is computed as the representation/sign of objectified labor” (1988a, 288). Thus representation is at the very heart of economic value.

Aune’s exercise in rhetorical translation makes visible a distinction between economics as the site of exploitation and (national) politics as the space for the rhetorical struggle over class interests. This distinction suggests that rhetorical agency is a form of mediation between economic and political levels of an integrated capitalist world-system. However, as a mechanism of mediation, rhetorical practice exists to place the United States’ national values as a transcendental moral authority regulating future rhetorical invention. Aune’s turn to hermeneutics accomplishes the goal of infusing Marxism with a communicative model of rhetorical agency, but does so with considerable risks. First, the nationalist conflation of cul-

tural value and economic value displaces the international division of labor. Second, a hermeneutic-inspired approach to rhetorical agency makes invisible the institutional and class interests of rhetorical studies to imagine its role in the creation of citizen-subjects. Finally, a hermeneutically inspired class-based politics fails to appreciate how capitalist exploitation works in and through cultural logics of domination and representation. While I am concerned about the effects of a hermeneutic vision of rhetorical agency on class politics, Aune nonetheless makes visible the exploitation lurking within a hermeneutic politics of dialogic community and civility.

#### Rhetorical agency: Class struggle as a social movement

The organization of the working class into a social movement offers a second option for building a model of rhetorical agency as political communication. As Dana Cloud writes, “I believe a more traditional rhetorical occupation with the study of social movements, particularly labor, should inform scholars interested in understanding and transforming relationships of power, both material and symbolic, in the workplace” (2001, 270). The advantage this vision of rhetorical agency has over the hermeneutic approach is that it more forthrightly embeds rhetorical agency into the figure of a collective subject—the working class—and its representative, the union. From this critical perspective, a social movement approach immediately distributes the field of political struggle into opposing camps: the dominant and the subordinate. This essential bifurcation of the social becomes the unifying matrix of different spheres of interaction (political, economic, cultural). In Cloud’s hands, at least, real social movements are on the side of the subordinate, challenging the structures of power and domination as an “oppositional bloc” (272). However, Cloud’s appropriation of the social movement tradition of rhetorical agency has a critical edge; she wants to privilege a working-class social movement in opposition to other social movements she identifies as being implicated in the cultural politics of difference.

For Cloud, the turning away from class-based social movements to affiliate with the cultural politics of difference is partly due to the influence of cultural studies on the interface between communication and politics (2001). Her broad strokes tend to ignore how many critics within the orbit of cultural studies find the emphasis on the politics of difference to

be the effect of how cultural studies and communication come together to refashion culture as a problem of communication. For example, Grossberg has repeatedly isolated the emphasis on identity and difference as the result of “equating culture and communication” (1997c, 282). From this perspective, an emphasis on the cultural politics of difference is not the result of cultural studies per se, but the attempt to use the intellectual work of cultural studies on mediated texts and audiences to form an alternative model of communication (often drawn out of the critical vocabulary of semiotics and structuralism) and then use that model to imagine the politics of culture as primarily an ideological question of signification, representation, interest, and identity. For Grossberg, the creation of a “communicational cultural studies” (282) displaces the heterogeneous character of the different levels of material experience and repeats a modern philosophical tendency to dematerialize the “real” into a transcendental philosophy of intersubjectivity (Grossberg 1997a).

On the terrain of rhetorical agency, Cloud’s disagreement with the cultural politics of difference is less about the importance of “materiality and class” and more about a desire to harness a Gramscian-inspired working-class social movement to a different model of communication, one less associated with the constitutive and aesthetic dimensions of representation and ideology (what Grossberg calls communicational cultural studies) and one more committed to an “instrumental”/classical model of communication (or rhetoric as persuasion). This disagreement over communication models demonstrates an anxiety over the proper character of political struggle and is symptomatic of Cloud’s desire to control the character of radical social change. Her emphasis on social movements as a collective figure of rhetorical agency and the union as its representative provides the necessary division of the political into dominant and subordinate. Therefore, a communication model of rhetorical agency mediates the relationship between the two groups (the social movement representing social change and modern capitalist production representing the social structures of power). To imagine that the political character of rhetorical agency requires a choice between the instrumental and aesthetic dimensions of communication is a false choice.<sup>7</sup> More importantly, a debate over the proper model of communication for imagining rhetorical agency displaces an investigation into the disciplinary presupposition that rhetorical agency should be imagined in the idiom of communication theory. From Grossberg’s perspective, such a move still imagines rhetorical agency as a form of intersubjective mediation. In other words, my criticism of Cloud’s vision

of rhetorical agency is not based on a meta-model disagreement. Instead, it focuses on how her vision of rhetorical agency, or any other vision, posits communication as the medium of rhetorical agency suspended between structures of power and social change. Before proceeding, it is necessary to comment on how she imagines communication and culture alongside the global character of capitalism.

For Cloud the modern organization of production is built on a conflict between the industrial proletariat and Fordist models of production. Cloud focuses on the vast number of industrial workers around the world; however, the transnationalization of production disrupts the social relations of production and consumption. The transnationalization of production disrupts the ability to limit rhetorical agency as the political communication of a union-based social movement. Cloud writes that “Fordist models of production, including sweatshops and the assembly line, remain the norm in the production of commodities” (2001, 271). However, this is too simple of an account of the world-capitalist economy. For example, the “transnationalization of production” means more than the dispersion of mass production assembly lines across the globe. It also means that “production is increasingly disintegrated into geographically separated tasks and shared among countries” (Storper 2001, 94). Hence, the international division of labor takes on a significant new twist as the finished product is increasingly the result of differential labor markets working on the same commodity in different parts of the globe. As Spivak (1988a) remarks, disintegrated production relies on a system of international subcontracting whereby the most labor-intensive stages of production are dispersed to regions of the world where labor is made less expensive. The production process is finished in the more economically rich countries at the same time as the commodity is sold primarily in the richer parts of the world. International subcontracting, thus, does more than simply change the nature of the production process associated with Fordism; it also severs the link between the places of production and consumption that were so dear to the modern forms of Fordism.

The desire to organize a working-class social movement on the ground of a Fordist model of production fails to take into account how the globalization of economic production makes older models of class politics more difficult to apply to the present. As Comaroff and Comaroff testify, “The global dispersal of manufacture is likely to fragment modernist forms of class consciousness, class alliance, and class antinomies at an exponential rate.” At the same time, it becomes increasingly difficult to rely on a vision

of place to orient class formation since transnational production “is also likely to dissolve the ground on which proletarian culture once took shape and to disrupt any sense of rootedness within organically conceived structures of production.” Put another way, while there is a rich history of working class rhetorical agency, this history is still one that has arisen “relatively infrequently even under the worst of Fordist conditions” and as this history moves into more global spaces of production, “existing relations among labor, place and social reproduction—and with them, the terms of class conflict itself—have been thoroughly unsettled for now” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, 12).

Cultural studies provides Cloud with some intellectual traction to posit a choice between communication models to strategically assess the development of class consciousness. But the choice between communication models still leaves political communication as the proper way to imagine rhetorical agency. Cloud’s desire to privilege one social movement over another is really an effort to provide the grounds by which political interests can be formed independently of communication and culture. Such a view ignores the central insight of cultural materialism: that communication and culture are part of the productive forces of social being (Williams 1980). The problem here is that Cloud envisions class politics as emerging from an “objective fact,” a preformed position that can be “articulated with race, gender, sexuality, nation and other axes of self-definition” (Cloud 2001, 273). Yet social categories do not exist independently of class and class does not exist independently of other categories of self-definition. John Frow, one of the most articulate voices of cultural studies on class analysis, offers a multidimensional vision of class as encompassing economic, political, and ideological modes of production. While exploitation remains the ground for a class politics, Frow writes that “class interests exist not as underlying or objective relations or outcomes but as hypotheses, more or less rationally calculated (or miscalculated)” (1995, 105). Frow’s approach more closely aligns with Gramsci’s insight about civil society, that the organization of an oppositional bloc cannot be reduced to a purely economic vision of class interest (Gramsci 1971). From Cloud’s perspective, and I would add other social movement approaches as well, rhetorical agency exists as a political mediation between two classes: the dominant and the subordinate. In the case of Cloud’s class-based social movement this means that rhetorical agency can never be a part of communication’s production of social being; therefore, it can never be located squarely within the logics of capitalism. Hence, a permanent anxiety

is built into the heart of rhetorical agency, activating a concern with designating the proper communicative tactics and strategies as well as the proper social movement to lead social change. This anxiety generates research and expertise to manage the gap between the dominant and the subordinate, but it never escapes the anxiety. My argument in the next section is that the only way to escape this disciplinary anxiety is to abandon communication as a political model for imagining rhetorical agency.

#### Rhetorical agency: The communicative labor of bio-political production

For those of us who find Marxism a valuable conceptual toolbox for investigating rhetorical agency, labor provides an important ontological point of departure. However, to fully appreciate labor, it is necessary to disentangle labor from its close identification with class. All too often Marxist-inspired critics start with class because they imagine class to be the way to simplify the political struggle. However, this political simplification into two competing classes displaces the conceptual abstraction, social production, and political organization that make possible the segmentation of labor practices necessary to structure and form classes. As the previous two sections demonstrate, the effect of a political communication model of rhetorical agency is to view production in strictly economic dimensions (economism) without taking into account how production includes political, cultural, and ideological dimensions. Moreover, whether the model imagines rhetorical agency in terms of reinventing cultural traditions (hermeneutics) or in terms of collective action (social movements), the emphasis on rhetorical agency as a model of political communication, prefigures the significance of rhetorical agency as always already in support of, or opposition to, the institutional structures of power. Thus a permanent anxiety about the character of rhetorical agency is made inevitable, because rhetorical agency as political communication suspends dialectically between structures of power (in this case economic exploitation) and the possibility of social change. To break out of this dialectical anxiety requires more than an alternative model of communication; it requires the abandonment of the dialectical interface between structure and change.

My effort to abandon this dialectical vision of rhetorical agency begins with returning to the constitutive power of labor. One vector in the constitutive power of labor concerns its ability to generate value (Hardt

and Negri 1994). For Marx, the appropriation of labor's surplus value is the central fact that describes the capitalist process of valorization. For Hardt and Negri, the appropriation and measure of objectified labor in capitalist exchange relations is a negative vision of labor, because it describes how the laws of capital structure and capture labor power. As Hardt and Negri argue, however, Marx offered a more affirmative vision of labor, one more associated with "self-valorization" (2000, 8–9). What makes labor self-valorizing is its ability to affirm life against its capture and exploitation. Life-affirming labor is the site of material agency as a constituent power: "a force that bursts apart, breaks, interrupts, unhinges any preexisting equilibrium and any possible continuity" (Negri 1999, 10). From this perspective, the constitutive power of labor takes priority because it attempts to expand a democratic will. For Negri, "Constituent power is tied to the notion of democracy as absolute power . . . [and] the moral struggle . . . between constituent power and the theory and praxis of the limits of democracy, becomes more and more prominent the further history advances" (10). In other words, to begin with life-affirming labor is to highlight the immanence of democracy and the parasitic nature of capitalism.

This more affirmative approach to labor allows labor and value to embrace a material ontology independent of the strict structural location of labor in the capitalist mode of production. This means that one can reconceptualize the idea of production away from the economism left in the wake of Marx's more negative vision of labor. For example, from an economic direction, the labor theory of value requires a distinction between productive and unproductive labor. Productive labor is labor directly implicated in the creation of surplus value; workers akin to the modern proletariat, usually a man, sells his labor power for a portion of the day longer than it would take to earn enough to consume the commodities necessary for his return the next day. Yet, this economic view of production ignores the large amounts of (often gendered and raced) labor associated with care, affect, and consumption that take place beyond the factory gates at home, in hospitals, in schools, and in stores. The central contribution of feminist political economy was the dismantling of this binary of productive and unproductive labor to reveal the labor of women and, in many cases, women of color as well as those that fall outside of the international division of proletariat labor.<sup>8</sup>

For Hardt and Negri (1994), feminist political economy and struggle represents a historical challenge to a static and constant approach to value and labor left behind by classical Marxism. When care work, for example,

becomes a part of the production of social networks, it suggests, to Hardt and Negri, the self-valorization of labor makes visible the “production of production itself” (10–11). What feminist political economy means for Hardt and Negri is that production is more than an economic category; it gestures to a historically variable ontology of labor that displaces old distinctions between production and consumption, and/or social production and social reproduction, in order to account for how new forms of labor generate new forms of value. Thus, a history of production points to how a labor theory of value includes its inverse: a value theory of labor as labor and value comingle in a historically dynamic and variable practice of constituting life.<sup>9</sup>

As I suggested in the second section, there are good reasons to believe that a new ontology of production is afoot. Yet these changes are more fundamental than shifts toward transnational production. The terrain of capitalist production must be refigured as one that produces, manages, orients, and appropriates life. Hardt and Negri describe the current change in capitalist production as “bio-political production” (2000, 22). Bio-political production describes the process by which the dominant qualitative force driving material production is the production of life and social being (2000). In so doing, the current stage of capital is both extensive as it reaches into the far corners of the globe and intensive as it reaches down into the very fabric of human life. What they call postmodern capitalism is a shift from the formal to the real subsumption of labor; in other words, capital exists everywhere, gobbling up every domain of social action. In this way, capitalism has never been more vampiric than today, living as it does on the cooperative labor of vast networks of social production.<sup>10</sup>

On the terrain of bio-political production, labor processes take on a new dimension as capital attempts to harness and rechannel self-valorizing labor for the valorization of capital. Hardt and Negri (2000) borrow the idea of immaterial labor to describe how capitalism’s valorization depends on the exploitation of intellectual, communicative, and affective labor. Labor is described as immaterial not because it has been removed from capitalist logics of commodity production, but because the nature of the commodity is changing. Maurizio Lazzarato (1996) posits two significant changes in the character of commodity production. The first way concerns the informational content of the commodity. This describes how the labor process increasingly relies on teamwork, information, and increased participation in decision making, often with the help of cybernetic and communication technologies. Second, immaterial labor also implies a cultural element to

the commodity. This cultural content includes “the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashion, tastes, consumer norms, and more strategically, public opinion” (133–34). Hardt and Negri expand the notion of immaterial labor beyond commodity production to include the production of bodies, affect, and social networks. Immaterial labor does not mean that dangerous, repetitive, mind-numbing, and body-breaking work has gone away. It points to a form of labor that capitalism is becoming increasingly reliant on for its valorization, a historical process that is transforming both the extensive and intensive dimensions of production. Immaterial labor also helps to posit a more historical ontology for production, one in which the old distinctions between productive labor and unproductive labor (those engaged in commodity production and those that are not) are no longer useful as the production and reproduction of human life and conduct become the terrain of bio-political production. In my view, immaterial labor offers an alternative model for rhetorical agency.

As a way toward a material ontology of rhetorical agency I would claim that the persuasive, aesthetic, and deliberative characteristics of communication (elements associated with the information and cultural content of the commodity as well as the social networks of care) reside in the matrix of bio-political production. From this perspective, rhetorical agency can be remodeled as communicative labor, a form of life-affirming constitutive power that embodies creativity and cooperation. As such, it extends beyond commodity production *per se*, to include communication’s role in building social networks of all kinds. Hence, we should take seriously how the current stage of global capital requires communicative labor, networks, and technologies.

Theodore Striphas (2001) argues that there is a functional equivalence between how cultural materialism (cultural studies) imagines the role of communication as a means of social production and how Hardt and Negri describe the process of bio-political production. However by resituating cultural materialism’s emphasis on communication on the terrain of production, instead of on the terrain of communication theory, we can escape a forced choice between different communicative models of rhetorical agency. For example, instrumental goal-oriented forms of persuasion exist as strategic attempts to coordinate behavior and belief; aesthetic forms of rhetoric highlight the representational and technological forms of language and communication in the production of subjectivity, the commodity, and public opinion; and deliberative models of rhetoric emphasize the norma-

tive power of argument, discussion, debate, and dialogue as decision-making practices.

The desire to highlight the political agency of rhetoric inevitably transforms rhetoric into a model of communication. As I have demonstrated so far, none of these models captures the role of communicative labor in postmodern capitalism. Therefore, we should abandon a debate about the political merits and limitations of different models of communication in order to better assess the historical interaction between rhetoric and capitalism. In contrast, the central advantage of re-specifying rhetoric as communicative labor is that it brings back to the forefront changes in the sphere of production and the role that rhetoric plays as a practice, process, and product of economic, political, ideological, and cultural value. To be sure, this move requires that we abandon a communicative ontology that views humans as essentially symbol-using creatures so that we might rearticulate communicative action into a material history of production and living labor. The analytical advantage of such a re-specification is that we can begin to imagine how rhetorical agency as communicative labor can be abstracted and captured to perform gendered, nationalized, and raced work—forms of work and labor that can create class structures and class forms, and can distribute bodies along the international division of labor. In other words, by focusing on communicative labor we can understand how communication makes possible the invention of class.

As a form of constituent power, however, labor can never be reduced to its capture, command, and control by capital. For Hardt and Negri the cooperative potential of affirmative labor, or more specifically, the qualitative significance of communicative and affective labor, generates a productive excess impossible to calculate and control. The social force of labor “appears simply as the power to act. . . . Anything that blocks this power to act is merely an obstacle to overcome—an obstacle that is eventually outflanked, weakened, and smashed by the critical powers of labor and the everyday passional wisdom of the affects” (2000, 358). Living labor’s power to act demonstrates an ability to challenge and create new values. Therefore, rhetorical agency comes first; it realizes the value necessary for the current regime of capital and the values necessary to challenge the current regime of governance.

What does this mean for the political dimensions of rhetorical agency?<sup>11</sup> It means that politics cannot be disconnected from the sphere of bio-political production. To do so would be to provide a place where the revolutionary energy of communicative labor becomes harnessed to the

social division of labor. To take the example of free speech, when free speech becomes a political right disconnected from the constitutive power of labor, it becomes possible to balance the right of free speech against societal protection. In this way, the domain of the political-legal becomes a space for coercive restrictions on the constitutive power of labor.<sup>12</sup> Being political, as Engin Isen highlights, is to disagree with the dominant regime of citizenship.<sup>13</sup> Recall that the political dimension of communicative labor is built into bio-political production's attempt to harness and capture the constitutive power of communication. As living labor, communication acts; there is no anxiety here about the status of rhetorical agency, because its action generates the value of living labor. Rhetorical agency is everywhere. To fully flesh out the politics of living labor requires a future study on how communicative labor provides new technologies and strategies for a temporal and spatial disagreement with the command logics of bio-political capitalism.

### Conclusion

Rhetorical studies has too often relied on a model of rhetorical agency that privileges a strategic model of political communication. Alternative models of communication have been suggested, but the replacement of one model for another leaves unexamined the presupposition that rhetorical agency as communication primarily mediates the dialectical relationship between structure and social change. As long as rhetorical agency is harnessed to a communicative model of interaction, rhetorical studies is destined to lodge a permanent anxiety over the quantity and quality of rhetorical agency necessary to change the structures of power at the center of its intellectual labor. This anxiety will grow more tortured due to the need to rescale and reframe the rhetorical situation for different media, spaces, and temporalities capable of investigating the disjunctive spheres of global production. In the meantime, this anxiety will continue to transform rhetorical critics and theorists into moral entrepreneurs for proper communicative behaviors and strategies. A materialist-communicative approach to rhetorical agency, a theory of rhetoric that imagines it as a life-affirming labor, allows an escape route from playing the role of moral entrepreneur. It does so by re-specifying rhetorical agency as communicative labor. As such, rhetorical agency, in all its communicative dimensions, is at once an in-

strument, object, and medium for harnessing social cooperation and coordination as the life-affirming value of communicative labor. As a value-creating practice, capitalism attempts to harness rhetoric's informational, instrumental, cultural, and cooperative dimensions. However, the constitutive power of rhetoric suggests an alternative politics: a common creativity and invention, a productive excess and joy, the material immanence of democracy.

*Department of Communication Studies  
University of Minnesota*

### Notes

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1. I recognize the awkwardness of suggesting that rhetorical studies should look outside of communication theory to develop an idea of rhetorical agency. It may be a unique function of U.S. rhetorical scholars often being associated with departments of communication that has created the tendency to view rhetoric in the terms of communication theory. My argument is indebted to Lawrence Grossberg's resistance to defining cultural practices in the idiom of communication theory; see Grossberg (1997a, 1997b, 1997c).

2. Such a reading would fail to recognize how Aune's and Cloud's approaches to the question of rhetorical agency are endemic to rhetorical studies. Aune deploys a vision of rhetorical agency that underwrites the textualist protocols and humanist politics associated with the renaissance in public address, while Cloud advocates a mode of rhetorical agency that, despite its political differences, shares with other social movement approaches an emphasis on the collective agency of social movements to struggle against social domination.

3. For a theoretical essay about the relationship between rhetorical pedagogy and cultural class, see Greene (2003).

4. For critiques of Aune's nationalism, see Cloud (2002) and Greene (2002). For a challenge to the revival of class based politics, see Sells and Jaros (1996).

5. For example, see Chow (2002), Lowe (1996), Nelson (2001), Pateman (1988), Roediger (1999), Weeks (1998), and Spivak (1988a).

6. For a similar argument from the standpoint of literary theory, see Spivak (1988b).

7. See Greene (1998) on how the debates between the instrumental and constitutive dimensions of rhetoric have done more harm than good in the creation of a materialist rhetorical theory.

8. For an introduction to feminist political economy, see Barrett (1988); Bland, Brundson, Hobson, and Winship (1978); Eisenstein (1979); and Kuhn and Wolpe (1978). For a critical comment on the changing nature of capitalism and feminism, see McRobbie (1994).

9. Hardt and Negri borrow the idea of a "value theory of labor" from Elson (1979).

10. Hardt and Negri name the current juridical regime regulating capitalism's appropriation of bio-political production "Empire."

11. To be sure, many commentators find Hardt and Negri's models of political action unsatisfying. However, part of the political value of their work resides in reimagining the political philosophy of communism as an alternative to capitalism.

12. My example is drawn from *Dennis v. United States*, 341 U.S. at 494.

13. See Isin (2002, 275–86). Perhaps a political model of disagreement is the practice of file sharing and/or the struggle to attach political rights to the labor of transnational migrant workers regardless of nationalistic assumptions about citizenship and rights. The point is, however, we should not prefigure the character of this disagreement by asserting a transcendental model of good communication.

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