Rhetorical Capital: Communicative Labor, Money/Speech, and Neo-Liberal Governance

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Ronald Walter Greene

In discussing the shift from classical rhetoric to modern rhetoricality, a condition that embeds a “generalized rhetoric [into] the deepest levels of human existence,” John Bender and David Wellbery note the role of advertising: “Like other forms of mass communication, advertising rehabilitates—indeed renders virtually universal—rhetoricality at once akin to and utterly divorced from classical persuasion.”

Advertising is like classical rhetoric because advertising retains the instrumental emphasis on persuasion, but uncouples itself from the classical tradition by permeating every sphere of human interaction. What Bender and Wellbery describe as a break between the ancients and the moderns, contemporary US rhetorical studies transformed into its central problematic: How to balance an idea of rhetoric as an art bound by a situated time and place while accounting for the rhetorical character of nearly anything.

However, if advertising “renders virtually universal” rhetoricality, then contemporary rhetorical theory “is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today.” A political economy of rhetoric, therefore, requires our attention.

Typically, though it can be hard to find, rhetorical studies approaches political economy in five ways. First, one can explore the rhetoric of economics as a specialized discourse; second, scholars study public debates that directly or indirectly address the economy; third, rhetorical studies focuses on anti-corporate, anti-capitalist, pro-union rhetorical activism; fourth, one can study corporate communication; finally, one can explore the links between rhetorical pedagogy and class. All five perspectives are important and open possibilities for imagining a “postcapitalist politics.” However, our critical practice should do more than rediscover corporate
and capitalist power lurking behind persuasive genres and/or celebrate rhetorics that express that another world is possible. We must be sensitive to how capitalism incorporates rhetorical communication into its regime of accumulation and its mode of regulation. A political economy of rhetoric requires more than a critical hermeneutics; it needs to locate rhetoricality within the international division of labor. I want to posit three concepts for pursuing such a materialist approach to the political economy of rhetoric: communicative labor, money/speech, and neo-liberal governance.

Advertising represents one way rhetoric locates itself within the division of labor. It represents what Maurizo Lazzaratto calls the cultural content of the commodity—“the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashion, tastes, consumer norms and, more strategically, public opinion.” From such a standpoint, advertising does more than siphon off the surplus value of the commodity; it and its counterpart marketing increasingly make surplus value possible by affecting the very production of commodities. Advertising is, from Lazzarato’s perspective, a species of immaterial labor and belongs to a generalized rhetoric I have named communicative labor. The conceptual value of communicative labor is that it provides a way into the division of labor in the production of rhetorical forms. It also describes how capitalism increasingly relies on the social dimensions of communication—control, deliberation, persuasion, cooperation, competition, creativity—for the accumulation of capital and the appropriation of social wealth. Communication becomes central to capitalism because “one has to express oneself, one has to speak, communicate, cooperate” for capitalism to succeed. Communicative labor is more than how people talk about their jobs, since work is made more valuable by reading, writing, speaking, and digitizing. Moreover, it includes the social reproduction made possible by teaching communication skills and competencies. Communicative labor helps to capture the social relations embedded in capitalism’s need for and production of “rhetorical sensitivity.” The concept of communicative labor does not doom the rhetorical to always already serving the logics of capitalist accumulation; it describes how social wealth increasingly relies on the political, economic, and cultural values produced by communication. As such, communicative labor points to a political antagonism within capitalism between the exploitation of communication and a mode of cooperation that exceeds capitalist command.

One heroic history of rhetoric begins with the disavowal of the economic motives of sophisticated speech-writers and a call for a political rhetoric, one harnessed to the needs of communal governance and republican virtues. Perhaps, more than any other element of rhetorical studies, the idea of the rhetorical citizen must be tempered by a political economy of political rhetoric. As political advertisement replaces the stump speech, the cost of communication skyrocket. In the United States, as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell argues, Gresham’s Law is at work in public discourse “as public discourse about issues and candidates financed chiefly by major corporations and fostered by the norms and conventions of commercialized, corporate owned outlets drives other kinds of public discourse out of circulation.” Currently, the US Supreme Court
provides free speech protection to the money that finances the political process.\textsuperscript{11} This is not an absolute right: The Supreme Court draws a distinction between money as a contribution and money as an expenditure and allows contributions to be more regulated than expenditures. Two things require comment: (1) The Court has fused money and speech under the norm of free speech. I want to name this fusion money/speech. Money/Speech is the overdetermined articulation of money and advocacy that can appear in different rhetorical forms: political advertisements, oratory, lawn signs, lobbying. (2) Money/Speech understands political rhetoric as a financial process: “Virtually every means of communicating . . . requires the expenditure of money.”\textsuperscript{12} Money/Speech appears in different rhetorical forms, but is more importantly a field of social management that works institutionally to “embed and socially regularize behavior.”\textsuperscript{13} Put differently, money/speech moves the citizen-rhetorician out of the public sphere and into an apparatus of advocacy populated by new genres like “electioneering communication” and new rhetorical agents like PACS and 527’s.

Money/Speech provides a way to move the political economy of rhetoric from the terrain of capitalist production and reproduction to the terrain of finance capital. The central point of finance capital is to make money with money. Conceptualizing political rhetoric as a form of finance capital explains the New York Times’s fascination with the political leanings of hedge-fund managers.\textsuperscript{14} More importantly, campaign finance increasingly takes the form of a hedge fund. Not only does money/speech hedge its bets by financing competing candidates, but it also partakes in long and short positions in ideas and people as investments. One important characteristic of finance capital is that it “has had quintessentially global interests . . . In its geographical fluidity, finance capital takes the global as its appropriate scale of operation.”\textsuperscript{15} One might notice, then, how the restriction on “foreign nationals” on the field of money/speech allows the US to generate its own “exceptions to neoliberalism.”\textsuperscript{16} Such an exception may do more to generate racialized national formations than promote a democratic public sphere.\textsuperscript{17}

A political economy of rhetoric does not so much posit an economic theory to know rhetoric as much as it places rhetoric within a field of governance. As Foucault argues, between the sixteenth and eighteenth century, the economy came to “designate a level of reality” while political economy emerged as “the science and the technique of intervention of the government into that field of reality.”\textsuperscript{18} From such a starting point, capitalism exists as an ensemble of practices for regulating the “economy” and as a host of techniques and commands for governing the behaviors of individuals and institutions. Today, the hegemonic form of capitalism is neo-liberal, a rationality that governs the economy by “freeing markets” from regulation. More radically, it calls for the organization of all social life as a market. Thus, one effect of neo-liberalism is to imagine labor power as human capital; that is, as “an innate component of bodily and genetic equipment, and an acquired component of aptitudes produced as a result of an investment.”\textsuperscript{19} Similarly, we might think of rhetorical capital as the capacity to adapt to the shifting character of a rhetorical situation.
The cultivation of rhetorical capital is an investment in oneself and others as a communicative subject. If rhetoric has permeated human existence, it has partly done so because neo-liberalism encourages people to imagine themselves and others as value-producing subjects. A political economy of rhetoric provides the advantage of diagramming how different scales of governance—from the government of the self to the international trade in cultural commodities—rely on harnessing rhetoricality. Moreover, it allows for an exploration of neo-liberalism as a set of governing technologies that couple and uncouple different scales of governance.

A political economy of rhetoric should provide scholars with new knowledge about the social relations of rhetoricality. In other words, we need to know more about how the generation and regulation of rhetorical capital permeates “the new international division of cultural labor.”20 Communicative labor, money/speech, and neo-liberal governance are offered as a way to explore how capitalism accumulates and regulates the value of rhetoricality.

Notes