RHETORIC IN NEOLIBERALISM

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with Afterword by Bradford Vivian

Rhetoric, Politics and Society

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Rhetoric in Neoliberalism

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To my parents whose love and care for my being has been hegemonically framed by neoliberalism but will always exceed it.

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Rhetoric in Neoliberalism

Kim Hong Nguyen

There is a growing concern in the discipline of rhetorical studies about the credibility and public relevance of speech. Kathleen Hall Jamieson (1988) documents the decline in television coverage and newspaper reprinting of political speeches and the significant reduction in traditional forms of deliberation in favor of public discourse that is conversational and organized by personal narrative. Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee (2009) argue that the modern view of rhetoric as a form of manipulation is a key indication of the diminishing credibility of speech. Crowley and Hawhee and Jamieson all contrast this modern view of public speech to that of ancient Greco rhetorical values of copia, rhetorical invention, and altruistic citizenship in order to show that modern public speech has become increasingly functional and efficient, aimed at communicating as clearly as possible with the least number of words. Walter Ong (1982) describes how literate culture abstracts knowledge from the context in which and by whom it is produced, leading to neutral and abridged discursive formats like lists, statistics, facts, and how-to manuals. Bradford Vivian (2006) attributes the privileging of quotes that function as sound bites and other economical communicative practices to neoliberalism as a structural enterprise for media and cultural industries and as an ideology that promotes

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efficiency. Megan Foley (2012) argues that the circulation of sound bites is not indicative of a decline but rather demonstrates audience attachment to public speech in another truncated form. Whether economization is a symptom of speech's decline or rise, discourse in the contemporary era must be evaluated using new interpretative heuristics and ways of knowing to understand its value, effect, and magnitude.

Each of the essay writers in this volume contend with contemporary discourse's efficacy and effectivity by contextualizing and analyzing rhetoric in light of neoliberal governmentality and hegemony. The chapters in this collection illustrate that anxiety about speech in its modern forms takes place within a politically fractious scene of self-interested agents: words, phrases, and beats are copyrighted and protected by intellectual property law for entrepreneurs and corporations, further diminishing the "cultural commons" (McLeod 2001). American Tea Party candidates often speak without regard to history, facts, and other commonly agreed upon notions of truth. The documentary *The Corporation* (2003) discusses a landmark case that involved silencing two Fox News journalists exposing the health risks in consuming milk produced by Monsanto. The Bush administration was not held accountable for lying about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and other crucial details that brought about the post-9/11 War on Terror and on Iraq. Occupy Wall Street protests struggled to carve out a space for vocalizing dissent against corporate stakeholders in debt creation and governmental bailouts. Justice for Trayvon Martin, Afghan civilians, and for so many others is on the horizon in our permanent state of exception. It is common parlance to both watch and dismiss advertisements, talk shows, and even the news and governmental discourse as tools of misinformation and propaganda. An "irony bribe," as Dana Cloud (2010) puts it in relation to reality television, describes how audiences employ their skills at media literacy about authenticity and conventional narratives to accept the fiction of reality television. Jodi Dean analyzes this phenomenon about the proliferation of all sorts of discourse as communicative capitalism: "Facts, theories, judgments, opinions, fantasies, jokes, lies—they all circulate indiscriminately" (2014, 153). While the believability of discourse might be a concern as old as Plato's cave, neoliberalism has fundamentally changed cultural literacy putting the individual ego and self-interest (and not the public good or collective or communal interest) at the center of sense-making and at the center of justice.

Once theorized as an economic policy, neoliberalism has pervaded almost all spheres of our cultural landscape. In neoliberalism, workers

equipped with smartphones, elevator pitches, and business cards are obliged to be flexible to meet the increasing demands of the workplace. Sheryl Sandberg's Lean In Movement and professional advice that reconceives work as monetizing one's passion naturalize the commitment to work as a private endeavor. With the prospect of having to self-manage and provide for themselves, students are compelled to think about their education as preparation for the world of business and profit, take on unpaid internships for lines on their CVs, and build friendships with those who fortify their networking potential. Parents are pressured to make choices about children's diet, activities, and home environment to maximize language acquisition and to ensure their children's future success. Toys from Baby Einstein and Leap Frog, parenting magazines and memoirs like *Battle Hymn of a Tiger Mom*, and the rise of intensive mothering are indicative of the ever-conscious production of the neoliberal child-subject.

While CEOs and business entrepreneurs of new start-up ventures are celebrated as modern heroes saving companies from the recession's downward spiral and making a profit-making business from nothing, the cultural values of neoliberalism have material impact. Public funds have been both reduced and shifted toward subsidizing and increasing corporate ventures and profits. The public good both conceptually and materially has diminished over time. Recent news stories testify to the effects of neoliberalism on subjects. Shanesha Taylor went on the Today Show to explain her "moment of desperation" for leaving her two children in her car while she went to an interview in Scottsdale, Arizona (Kim 2014). Angel Henderson of Acworth, Georgia was arrested after she left her two children in a locked bedroom so that she could go to work (Shaw 2014). Moritz Erhardt, a 21-year-old intern with a history of epilepsy, died after working all night for several nights in a row at Bank of America's investment banking division in London (Kennedy 2013). Concerns over population growth in Japan increase as young generations claim to care more about work and friends (Buerk 2011; Haworth 2013). Movie star Gabrielle Union summed up her fertility struggle: "The penance for being a career woman is barrenness" ("Gabrielle Union" 2015). Intense demands on one's health, family, and community are reasoned as normalized consequences of professional advancement and progress.

As a political rationality that advances competition as its primary guiding principle and the "free market" as less expensive, less restrictive, and more efficient than the public sector, neoliberalism emphasizes the individual responsibility, privatization, and deregulation as good sources for

decision-making and judgment. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval define neoliberalism as "the set of discourses, practices, and apparatuses that determine a new mode of government of human beings in accordance with the universal principle of competition" (2013, 4). Neoliberalism is premised upon capital as essential to the biopolitical production of life and thus, the acceptance and adoption of capitalism's values, tenets, and logics permeate political, juridical, legal, social, and cultural realms of life. Dardot and Laval go on to explain that neoliberalism is markedly different from capitalism: "Neoliberalism is the *rationality of contemporary capitalism*—a capitalism freed of its archaic references and fully acknowledged as a historical construct and general norm of existence" (italics in original 4). Capitalism as an economic system of power and the vocabulary that names its entailments are so embedded and diffused in modern everyday life that publicly naming capitalism and its practices, differentiating the proletarian from the bourgeoisie can seem like unproductive and pessimistic modes of self-presentation, regulation, and adjustment. At one level, there is an acknowledged ignorance that encourages subjects to do the work of capitalism without being thoughtful, overthinking, or critically engaging that work. At another level, there is a pernicious disavowal of intent that enables biopolitical production of life to become the primary alibi for the drive of capital. As Wendy Brown astutely explains, "[N]eoliberalism can become dominant as governmentality without being dominant as ideology" (2005, 49). Neoliberalism produces a subject that participates in ways of thinking and acting that are in accordance to capitalist structures without having to evaluate how their thinking and actions compete or contradict other ideologies they may have.

Michel Foucault called the neoliberal subject, *homo economicus*, to delineate how subjects are expected to perceive, think, and act using economized/economizing logics and rationalities in neoliberalism. As he once argued in 1979, "*Homo economicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself" (Foucault 2008, 226). The subject of economic interest or, *homo economicus*, is encouraged to calculate and balance their decisions and actions in relation to the maintenance and advancement of their self-interest and self-governance. As Lois McNay explains, "The autonomous citizen is s/he who manages these diverse networks—work, household, pension, insurance, private property—in the most responsible and prudent fashion vis-à-vis the avoidance of risk and the maximization of their own happiness" (2009, 61). "Sharing" enterprises like monetizing housing, vehicles, and other properties when not in use, locating strategies that not

only maintain one's job but also advance one's prospect of promotion, using social media during off-work hours for further staging the professional self, and marketing all aspects of one's life as a lifestyle brand on blog sites (e.g. Gwyneth Paltrow's Goop and Blake Lively's Preserve)—all of these once-scrupulous or self-absorbed practices are now-conventional and acceptable habits of everyday life in neoliberalism. An entrepreneur of every aspect of his or her life, the subject of neoliberalism is encouraged to generate "a relationship of the subject to him- or herself as 'human capital' to be infinitely increased—that is, a value to be ever further valorized" (Dardot and Laval 2013, 15).

This conception of the neoliberal subject is distinct from the subject of right theorized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and others. Through allegiance to the sovereign or state, the subject of right gained privileges, such as protection of person and property and movement within sovereign borders, by relinquishing natural freedoms that benefited solely his or her own self-interest. In return, the subject of right is expected to support sovereign, governmental, or communal interests, whose interference and role aimed to ensure equal liberties for all. Rousseau writes, "What man loses by the social contract is his natural freedom and an unlimited right to everything that tempts him and that he can get; what he gains is civil freedom and the proprietorship of everything he possesses" (1978, 56). In recognizing that the sovereign seeks to satisfy equally the needs of all subjects, the subject of right "respects not so much what belongs to others as what does not belong to oneself" (Rousseau 1978, 57). While the subject of right conducted him or herself in mutually coexistence with the sovereign and state, the subject of interest represents, according to Foucault, "an essential, fundamental, and major incapacity of the sovereign" (2008, 292). In other words, the economic subject is compelled to think and act in accordance to his or her own self-interest. Self-interest in neoliberalism functions productively to encourage subjects to adapt, modify, and improve themselves. Such self-improvement and self-government operates to the benefit of all to the degree that neoliberalism has created the conditions of possibility for each subject to live up to his or her own potential and "for the interplay of their rivalry to satisfy the collective interest" (Dardot and Laval 2013, 47). This "collective interest" is satisfied by way of individual pursuit of the economized capacity made possible through neoliberalism. To wit, whereas a subject of right accepts that their right to resources "is always subordinate to the community's right to all" (Rousseau 1978, 58), the subject of interest can not only act patriotically

by virtue of their economic participation and pursuit in securing their own self-interest but also that right to do so is now the primary condition for the survival of neoliberal governmentality. As President George W. Bush called upon Americans in his first speech following the 9/11 attacks, "I ask your continued participation and confidence in the American economy" (President Bush 2001, np).

This conception of the neoliberal subject is different from the subject of capitalism theorized by Adam Smith,[1] Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and others. While the differences between their philosophies of economics are worth exploring, the subject of capitalism creates an external product, improves the process of production, and shows mastery of skill in the creation of that external product. This adaptation and improvement of the product in accordance to surrounding market conditions by the subject of capitalism is part of the means of production and is largely contained to the realm of the factory or workplace. Whereas the subject of capitalism might consult books and websites on their craft and area of expertise, the subject of neoliberalism might consult blog sites, such as Lifehacker.com, and apps, like Evernote, that make more efficient and simplify their lifestyle for enhanced mood, well-being, and productivity. Tips on how to better fit more leisure time in a day and get deeper rest at night, whether tycoons work on weekends and prefer yoga for exercise, and the shopping habits and brand loyalties of celebrities and other popular figures make intelligible "the good life" for that which the economic subject is expected to strive. Governed by neoliberal rationality, the subject learns to maximize his/her self as a worker, as the very product that is to be produced, improved upon, and championed.

The subject of capitalism is taken up by rhetorical critics Deidre McCloskey, James Aune, and others. In these studies, the market is represented as a closed, independent system outside of political and social relations. McCloskey's project known as the rhetoric of economics sought to analyze how rhetoric was instrumental in producing economic philosophy and knowledge. Like McCloskey, Aune (2001) uses rhetorical criticism to analyze economics, but with the difference that Marxism informs and motivates his critique. According to Catherine Chaput and Joshua Hanan, "Because both [McCloskey and Aune] understand rhetoric as a representational expression of a more primordial economic reality, power negotiation becomes confined to discovering the language that correctly describes economics as an a-priori condition" (2014, 2). These studies presuppose the economy as a separate, a priori domain of life that influences the ways

in which rhetoric is understood, made, and taken up. Trapped in a logic of influence, discourse in McCloskey's and Aune's understanding is both analyzed and judged in relation to a narrow notion of agency as political communication. In Aune's Marxist work, power is conceived as a repressive force, and the subject's agency is understood as correcting false consciousness through demystification and increased knowledge of capitalist structures. Thus, although the subject of capitalism is obliged to work for another's profit, he or she can realize their full potential and agency against capitalism via tactics of resistance to economic oppression. Chaput and Hanan argue that this mode of critique is also related to a common (and incomplete) interpretation of Foucault's understanding of discourse and power: That the role of discourse is hermeneutic and limited to improving our scholarly task at producing knowledge about power relations (2014, 4).

In contrast, understanding power as productive, rhetorical studies of neoliberalism examine how the very understanding of the economy as a distinct, a priori sphere itself is a kind of discourse and discursive move. Thus, rhetoric is not seen as a mere interpretative tool through which meaning-making is achieved, but rather as the very mode and organizing principle that circulates power relations, valuations, and logics. This crucial difference is missed, according to Ronald Greene, when rhetorical scholars focus on discursive forms without regard to the changes in capitalist production, including the role of affective and biopolitical labor. Techne in neoliberalism is arrived at through economic taxis and through learning the ways in which economic taxonomies structure and orient human relations, knowledge, and power (Chaput and Hanan 2014). Arguing that rhetorical agency is communicative labor, Greene contends, "[T]he persuasive, aesthetic, and deliberative characteristics of communication… reside in the matrix of biopolitical production" (2004, 201). Rhetoric as circulation untangles subjects from rigid models of rhetorical agency that privilege commodity production and participation in civic speech, and shifts our attention as both critics and subjects toward communicative labor: "a form of life-affirming constitutive power that embodies creativity and cooperation" (Greene 2004, 201). Communicative labor helps rhetorical scholars better attend to how all subjects—not just the orators behind podia and microphones or the writers whose handwriting is transformed to typescript—participate in the production of power relations, regardless of whether their rhetorical acts are recorded and duplicated for newspaper headlines or spectatorship, and regardless of whether their rhetorical performances (intend to) impact political or economic relations.

Greene's notion of communicative labor extends the concept of affective labor described by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri as "labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion" (2004, 108). They explain, "Affective labor is biopolitical production in that it directly produces social relationships and forms of life" (110). They rightly point out that this affective labor often falls primarily on the shoulders of women and minorities in service industries who are expected to do the work of relationship making, rapport producing, and reputation enhancing. Analyzing affective labor attends to the ways in which marginalized subjects are positioned and enabled to do the heavy lifting (both metaphorically and literally) of circulating power relations and amplifies how rhetorical agency cannot be simplified along the subordination/resistance binary or in connection to the realms of politics and economics.

However, Greene's communicative labor furthers Hardt and Negri's notion of affective labor. Decision-making processes are negotiated, communities are constituted, and logics are organized through rhetoric and communication practices. Traditional rhetorical scholars have reduced rhetoric (and rhetorical force) to the domain of public address in order to show how power subjugates and creates subjective compliance. In doing so, they not only discount agency but also ignore their disciplinary and intellectual connections within communication studies, which would invite consideration of interpersonal interactions, haptics, and other modes of communicative engagement. Communicative labor as a model of rhetorical agency discourages rhetorical scholars from uncritically continuing to examine the discourses of presidents, prime ministers, fascists, and social movement leaders as comprising the rhetorical canon. To locate how rhetoric gains salience between subjects in neoliberalism, Chaput (2010) advises tracking rhetorical circulation and force through repetition. While rhetorical studies is uniquely equipped to analyze neoliberalism as the rationality of modern-day capitalism, the study of rhetoric in its more quotidian forms and among marginalized subjects is long overdue but necessary in order to understand how rhetoric organizes everyday life in the neoliberal era.

This collection of essays takes these (and more) insights on materialist rhetoric as its point of departure in order to sketch out the changing contours of rhetorical theory and practice in the neoliberal era. Many scholars in the volume presume or explicitly take their cue from Foucault and other Foucauldian scholars in rhetorical studies, whose theorizations of

neoliberal governmentality examine how modern subjects are no longer coerced but nevertheless compelled to take on values and logics that promote their own self-management and regulation. Rhetoric has not simply adapted to neoliberalism; rather, neoliberalism has irrevocably reshaped and continues to reshape cultural practices, discursive forms and styles, norms, and conceptions of agency. New and reconfigured vocabularies and languages, logics and rationalities, strategies and tactics have emerged in order to facilitate and challenge neoliberalism's penetration into various spaces. Television commercials and print advertisements tell stories of romance and seduction in abbreviated forms, language is shortened on Twitter and Facebook, speech instructors reduce speeches to minimal lengths of time for classrooms maxed out at an ever-increasing capacity, course assignments require writing that simulates the conciseness of the editorial form in lieu of the typical research paper—these are symptomatic of not just a significant change in literacy and interpretation about discourse but also a major shift at the intersection between discourse, the subject, and power.

This book examines the contemporary rhetorical production of *homo economicus* and the various ways in which neoliberalism has become a way of thinking, orienting, and organizing all aspects of life around economized metrics of individualized and individuated success. The essays that compose this collection consider questions that have long concerned our field with particular emphasis on our cultural milieu. We ask: How are we persuaded to act toward our own economic ends? What are the rhetorical argumentative styles, logics, practices, norms, and conceptions of agency that enable subjects to thrive and resist in a neoliberal era? What are the various rhetorical strategies that neoliberal subjects employ in order to make do, reinforce, and resist economic, social, and political competition? How can rhetorics constitute the desire for equality and justice among unequal populations during neoliberalism? How does rhetoric obscure, maintain, or challenge the ways in which democracy, various institutions, and aspects of our everyday life are recreated in accordance to economic logics and calculative reasoning toward profit?

While neoliberalism primarily has been discussed primarily in relation to economic policy, political philosophy and practices of governance, and linguistic changes reflecting neoliberal values, the essays within the collection explore rhetorical practices, discursive strategies, and cultural logics that make up neoliberalism. The education industry is central to producing subjects capable of adapting to a social and political order based

on competition. Transparency and accountability are popularized values in neoliberalism that corporations and organizations use to promote an honest, democratic, and responsible image. This begs Hardt and Negri to ask "Accountable to Whom?" (2004, 290), a question that is also the title of Phillip Goodwin, Katrina Miller, and Catherine Chaput's analysis of university discourses and practices. They inaugurate our conversation with the term, ambient rhetoric, to describe how the environment of higher education is "felt" via a discourse that has no specific addressee, but nevertheless functions as a form of argumentation that shapes the way the subject's body and sensory modes feel and align with discourse. Using a cartographic methodology, Goodwin, Miller, and Chaput consider two case studies from California State University and State University of New York that show how universities participate in the circulation of neoliberal rhetoric through an array of strategies and practices that privilege the biopolitical health of the university over student and faculty concerns. Their essay demonstrates how a rhetorical circulation approach enables scholars and critics to problematize discourses that are not addressed to nor made accountable to anyone.

Blending aspects of rhetorical circulation and neoliberal epideictic, Mark Meister and Carrie Anne Platt ask how the ethos of a philanthropic figure helps prop up neoliberalism as a just system. They describe how Warren Buffett's personal thrifty practices and role as an investor mitigates his social and political advocacy for increased taxes for the wealthy. Their understanding of epideictic ethos captures how ethos is constructed in ways beyond the control of the speaker. At stake in neoliberal rhetoric, according to Meister and Platt, is the capacity to construct ethos. Building upon his work that suggests that Foucault's use of rhetoric and understanding of discourse operative in governmentality is epideictic, evokes a feeling of can-do-ness, and exaggerates the freedom of self-determination (2006), Robert Danisch also argues that ethos is central to the production and circulation of rhetoric. Danisch argues that the care of the self opens up the possibility for recognizing the difference between social imperatives and one's own conduct, which could be used to create new logics, practices, and patterns of conduct. To demonstrate how desire for self-care can function as the basis for relationality in neoliberalism, he examines what we might call a distributed network structure described by Hardt and Negri (2004, 86): Occupy Wall Street protests as a democratic organization with a decentralized hierarchical structure and communicative procedures.

While Danisch's analysis of Occupy Wall Street tethers Foucault's theory of power with a classical notion of the subject to delineate rhetorical agency, Samuel Jay introduces the notion of a "rhetoric of capacity" to highlight how neoliberal governance aims to create opportunities for economic subjects. In his analysis of the K-12 educational policy and discourses of the Obama administration, Race to the Top, Jay shows how the Obama administration used classical Aristotelian proofs, which situated Race to the Top within a history and grid of intelligibility of austere educational reform. Jay points to how instruction in neoliberal citizenship begins early, made possible by measurements of education quality that produce subjects that might maximize their "capacity." David Seitz and Amanda Tennant propose that Ranciere's political theory help account for the constitutive power of rhetoric to make and organize audiences that are subject to individualistic values in neoliberalism. They analyze the mediated attention around revitalization efforts of Braddock, Pennsylvania, and in particular, "the new Braddock worker" in order to consider how communicative practices premised on the notion of Ranciere's "count" illustrate "true democratic moments and change."

Recognizing how the "juridico-political order in neoliberalism is not independent of but belongs to the relations of production" (Dardot and Laval 2013, 10), Jennifer Wingard's application of rhetorical assemblage bears similarities to the rhetorical circulation model. In contrast to the enduring concept of ideograph, which describes how language repeats and circulates ideological and hegemonic values in political discourse (McGee 1980), a brand is Wingard's term for how language operates in all kinds of discourse in neoliberalism (Wingard 2013). She focuses on one particular brand for her analysis, "bad apple," which is a rhetorical figure through which neoliberal governmentality can "make live and let die" (Foucault 1997, 254) by assigning blame to individuals for violence that is both legal and exceptional. Wingard suggests that in the cases of George Zimmerman and Lt. Robert Bales, branding bodies as "bad apples" mobilize a neoliberal ethos that attributes violent action as individual choice, while protecting the state-sanctioned practices that enable violence.

Whereas Wingard follows Foucault's notion of power to make sense of transparency and exposing racism and the police state, Dean uses Lacanian psychoanalysis to argue that the production of violence (9/11) is staged for itself: a production of power for a new order. Psychotic discourse, Dean argues, promotes, and positions subjects as questioning truth-seekers unable to repress the fiction that makes the symbolic order work

efficiently, effectively, and affectively. In communicative capitalism or how discourse that circulates and appears to be equal with all others gains value against other discourses, she suggests that new media and networked communications can be central to creating a new grid of intelligibility for subjects to learn about themselves, each other, to build community.

Finally, Gerald Voorhees argues that rhetorical circulation, value, and judgment in our contemporary milieu is made possible by a New Platonism, whereby subjects are encouraged to interpret and judge discourses that articulate an already circulating truth. Voorhees shows that computational culture functions as neoliberalism's "pretense" or heuristic that neoliberal values of quantification, economization, and maximization can be achieved.

This edited collection should illustrate a range of conceptual inquiries and insights the field of rhetorical theory and criticism can make about neoliberalism. Hopefully, this project shows the strength and significance of rhetorical studies to provide language and analytical structures about how discourse circulates in neoliberalism. These essays in rhetorical studies demonstrate a paradigm shift away from the sovereign, autonomous subject as the rational locus of discursive control and dissemination and toward the production of discourse as central to power's limits and possibilities in the creation of subjectivities, including the economic subject of neoliberalism. This paradigm shift points to the ways in which rhetorical studies is best equipped with recognizing, analyzing, and contending with neoliberalism as the rationality of contemporary capitalism.

Note

1. Although Adam Smith is often dubbed the father of modern capitalism and credited for illuminating the virtues of self-interest and the invisible hand of the market, David Depew (2011) shows how contemporary readings of Smith run against the historical grain of Smith's republicanism.

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