Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism: Neoliberalism and the Overdetermination of Affective Energy

_Catherine Chaput_

In the world we have known since the nineteenth century, a series of governmental rationalities overlap, lean on each other, challenge each other, and struggle with each other: art of government according to truth, art of government according to the rationality of the sovereign state, and art of government according to the rationality of economic agents, and more generally, according to the rationality of the governed themselves. And it is all these different arts of government, all these different types of ways of calculating, rationalizing, and regulating the art of government which, overlapping with each other, broadly speaking constitute the object of political debate.

Michel Foucault, _The Birth of Biopolitics_

Critical rhetoricians interested in the power dynamics between rhetoric and capitalism have established for themselves the ambitious task of explaining how multiple, intertwined rationalities govern individual and collective
behavior in relationship to the ever-shifting logics of capitalism. Approaches to this complicated directive frequently envision rhetoric as a mediating force among agentive subjects who act within well-defined political economic landscapes. Wedded to a political-communicative model wherein appropriate rhetorical choices persuade those with authority to distribute disputed political and economic rights, rhetorical theory becomes a sophisticated handbook for discovering topoi and executing decorous statements. This focus, according to Ronald Walter Greene, results in a “permanent anxiety over the meaning and potential of rhetorical agency” that positions rhetoricians as “moral entrepreneurs scolding, correcting, and encouraging the body politic” (2004, 188, 189). Committing themselves to endless debates about correct responses in situated spaces, rhetorical theories that underscore agency lose site of the world in flux and of our participation in that world’s unpredictable unfoldings. Alternatively, Greene suggests rethinking rhetorical theory through a materialist-communicative model wherein the immaterial labor of communication produces value. Conceptualizing discursive practices as a form of labor rather than a form of political signification sidesteps anxiety about well-chosen language and emphasizes the life-affirming activity involved in deciphering issues, inventing paths through those issues, and communicating new ideas to others. In short, Greene’s materialist model challenges critical rhetoricians to end their perennial search for a discursive key to the storehouse of political economic goods (a practice propelled by liberal democratic hopes) so that they can begin to invent analyses and modes of production better suited to the contours of contemporary neoliberalism.

Unlike liberalism’s clearly assigned spaces for public life and private life or work time and leisure time, neoliberal spaces bear few obvious markers. The neoliberal landscape consists of blurred boundaries that fold into one another: information flows almost instantaneously, commodities and people transgress national boundaries, time accelerates, space collapses, and distinctions between such classic demarcations as agent and subject or politics and economics erode. Facilitated by dramatic changes in our sociopolitical boundaries, economic neoliberalism, what James Arnt Aune calls “economic correctness” (2001), reigns throughout vast uneven terrains opened up from the imploded borders of our liberal world. While economics does indeed rule the neoliberal landscape, it does not do so according to uncompromising rationalism. Political and cultural practices flowing into the previously segregated spaces of economics enable market rule through logics that operate entirely outside the rational-irrational divide. Economic neoliberalism moves from situation to situation, disregarding spatial boundaries between the political, economic,
and cultural realms as well as their attendant modes of persuasion, wearing away at the rhetorical linkages between appropriate discursive choices and agentic power.

Regardless of the particularities of neoliberalism’s spaces, structures, and governing practices, many rhetoricians continue to mediate among different worldviews based on outmoded liberal gauges. Some rhetorical theorists, for instance, maintain that the problematics of neoliberalism result from an imbalance between reason and passion. Even though the most ardent supporters of neoliberal practices hold firmly to a belief in its scientific rationality, rhetorical theorists often argue that passion overpowers reason in neoliberal discourse. The rhetorical form that sustains this disequilibrium is, according to Bradford Vivian, neoliberal epideictic. Based on an impassioned identification, epideictic texts “unite an otherwise fractured citizenry in a dynamic affective experience” (Vivian 2006, 15). Epideictic rhetoric functions didactically to unite the public on common moral grounds and often serves as a precursor to collective action (Hauser 1999). The trouble emerges when that collectivity relies too heavily on unchallenged identifications, resulting in what Dana Cloud names the “affective public.” This affective public makes poor decisions because it acts irrationally and avoids thoughtful deliberation; therefore, it must be met with “depth hermeneutics” (Cloud 2003, 137). The criticisms that both Vivian and Cloud lodge against the neoliberal epideictic have to do with its reliance on the passions to the detriment of reason. They both reproach such discourse for an affective language that fails to produce the political agency promised by liberalism, and they both desire a restorative balance through rhetorical deliberation. These theorists oppose neoliberalism, a political economy supported by an overdetermined affective energy, to liberalism, a political economic world wherein rational deliberation establishes social order over unpredictable passions. In the liberal framework of these theorists, affect frequently equates to emotion as contrasted to reason; in a neoliberal framework, affect functions separately from emotion and cannot be understood in terms of the reason–emotion divide.

While Greene no doubt shares many of the concerns raised by critics of economic and political neoliberalism, he cautions against falling back on liberal dichotomies, such as reason versus emotion, to challenge its normative strategies. To better understand the relationship between political economy and rhetoric in our contemporary world, we need to adapt our theories—ones as foundational as the rhetorical situation—to account for the neoliberal rationalities governing the interrelatedness of
politics, economics, and discourse. Greene moves us in this direction by rethinking rhetorical agency as communicative labor and allowing for that labor to encompass an entire range of life activities. This paper takes up his call to further explore the rhetorical possibilities of a living labor that engages and disputes “the command logics of bio-political capitalism” (2004, 203)—the multiple overlapping arts of governing that, according to Michel Foucault, constitute the object of political debate. Such an investigation requires a reexamination of rhetorical production attuned to the political economic and cultural spaces of neoliberalism. Therefore, I begin with a brief overview of neoliberalism and its implications for rhetoric before offering an alternative conception of how to theorize rhetoric within the spaces of late capitalism.

NEOLIBERALISM, SECURITY, AND THE OVERDETERMINATION OF AFFECTIVE ENERGY

Michel Foucault, in his 1978–1979 lectures at the Collège de France, addresses what he calls biopolitics, or the art of governing human populations through the disparate practices of neoliberalism. Contrary to the laissez-faire, free market rationality of classical political economy implicit in contemporary cries against big government, neoliberalism functions through a series of political and cultural interventions designed to implement competition as an economic rationality that counters purportedly irrational social practices. These interventions include international treaties that loosen cross-border trade, structural adjustment programs that dismantle the welfare state, and military actions based on the needs of transnational corporations, all of which privatize organizations, financialize life activities, and regulate culture according to appropriate rates of return. Yet neoliberalism, as Foucault discusses it, cannot be adequately traced through political policies and economic results because it involves a process of living and thinking that enables such entities as politics and economics to come into existence and then to regulate their own existence. For Foucault, neoliberalism operates through a biopolitics that emerges simultaneously at multiple points and that gives an organic coherency to myriad life practices. So conceived, neoliberalism governs our everyday activities through an embodied habituation—a way of thinking and acting that stems from discrete but interconnected technologies all bound up within the same asymmetrical power dynamics of economic competition (Foucault 2008, 118–21). Such a claim has
important ramifications for rhetoricians interested in how individuals and collectivities argue, deliberate, and determine future courses of action in a world shaped by neoliberal rationalities.

Foucault’s lectures on security, delivered one year prior to those on neoliberalism, offer an entry into this rhetorical inquiry. In these lectures Foucault argues that biopolitics work through mechanisms of security that regulate populations rather than individuals and do so through rational, mathematical calculations, what Jeremy Parker calls algorithmic modeling in his explication of Homeland Security’s efforts to create predictive software that identifies potential terrorists and future sites of attack. This form of security does not focus on the individual, as disciplinary power does, but on statistical averages for a given population and, in the case of Automated Target System (Parker 2007, 213), on credit scores and other financial data measured against normative numbers. As a power that plans its milieu according to possible, though uncertain, events or series of events (Foucault 2007, 20), security regulates populations rhetorically and uses mathematical topoi derived from algorithms that weigh the individual’s freedom against the population’s safety, transforming all life activities into calculable risks that function according to economic rationalities. The state, for instance, must discipline a population through education, health care, and imprisonment, but given the cost of such disciplining it must also determine acceptable rates of unemployment, disease, and crime. In such rationalized spaces, individuals are free to act as they choose as long as the population’s collective interests operate within the bandwidth appropriate to its social vitality. Technologies of security manage diverse ongoing processes according to the internal logics of neoliberalism, ensuring that everything functions through its prized logic of economic competition. Put differently, security converts human beings into self-entrepreneurs whose freely chosen education, work, and leisure decisions operate instinctually according to the economics of risk and reward. Such a schema no longer enforces appropriate subjectivities (normalization) but regulates the point at which individual actions impinge on the statistically favored rates of population success (normation).

Foucault’s discussion of biopolitics, the episteme governed by neoliberal rationality and empowered through technologies of security, provides important opportunities for theorizing rhetoric as a communicative labor within late capitalism. First of all, his theory of biopolitics requires that we reshape the internal dynamics of rhetoric, abandoning the understanding of such dynamics in terms of situations—particular moments that
demand discursive intervention in order to propel change—and instead conceptualizing them in terms of a milieu of dispersed transhistorical and transsituational moments. This ontological shift takes us from the rhetorical situation as a temporally and spatially fixed site of exigency, constraints, and discourse to rhetorical circulation as a fluidity of everyday practices, affects, and uncertainties. Unhinged from its role in negotiating political agency, rhetoric bursts through its site-specific bounds, circulates, and gives value to everyday practices just as the constant circulation of production and consumption generates political economic values. While money mediates the latter, rhetoric mediates the former and both need to be theorized if we wish to engage the neoliberal structures of late capitalism more completely. This means turning away from closed situations in which specific problems are deliberated by identifiable subjects who hold clear ideologies and turning toward transsituated circuits that include ordinary spaces and subjects who have fluctuating identities.

Second, Foucault transcends the epistemological stagnation of a communicative model wherein rhetoric moves audiences through encoded messages that these individuals decode and act on, a model afflicted by the precarious relationship between reality and representation. Working from a discursive methodology that virtually ignores questions of representation, Foucault explains that “politics and the economy are not things that exist, or errors, or illusions, or ideologies. They are things that do not exist and yet which we inscribe in reality” (2008, 20). A process of knowledge creation that does not chart linkages between discourse and agentive power but explores the truth-effects of a multifaceted discursive structure requires a concomitant shift from the liberal politics of rights and ideologies to the neoliberal politics of affects and connectivities. While liberal epistemologies search for the true match between rhetoric and audience, neoliberal epistemologies seek knowledge by following rhetoric as it energizes different audiences throughout diverse situations—a move that adjusts our focus from agentive power to value production. To summarize, theorizing neoliberalism demands a structural reorganization in the way we think about political-economic and cultural practices within capitalism from situation to transsituation and a new understanding of rhetoric as continuously moving through and connecting different instantiations within this complex structure.

A structural reorganization, one that replaces the foundational notion of rhetorical situations with rhetorical circulations, might begin by discarding binary thinking and its determinant relationships in favor
of Louis Althusser’s concept of dialectical overdetermination. According to Althusser, when Marx suggests that the Hegelian dialectic rests on its head and needs to be turned right side up again, he prompts a reframing rather than a methodological reversal. Marx’s critique, he says, poses “not the problem of the inversion of the ‘sense’ of the dialectic, but that of the transformation of its structures” (1990, 93). Althusser offers his conception of overdetermination as this transformation. Within the structure of overdetermination, an event “is inseparable from the total structure of the social body in which it is found, inseparable from its formal conditions of existence, and even from the instances it governs” (1990, 101). Overdetermination refuses the economic base as the determining center for a political-cultural superstructure; indeed, it replaces any such determining structure with a conceptual model in which temporally and spatially diverse events, conditions, and rationalities are copresent and mutually bound to each other—an understanding of power relations reminiscent of Foucault’s notion that multiple governing arts “overlap, lean on each other, challenge each other, and struggle with each other” (2008, 313). Althusser and his student converge on this point: if we are to understand and act within the neoliberal spaces of late capitalism, the object of political study should not be situated, as liberal models would have us believe, but must instead be transsituated.

Besides applying centrifugal force to rhetoric’s traditional structure, overdetermination also gives us a way to connect these scattered instances without a countering centripetal force that would pull them back together around a single originating axis. Affective energy offers a way to conceive of the connecting force at work within Althusser’s model. He argues, for instance, that an overdetermined event encompasses all its various relationships: “It is radically affected by them, determining, but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the various levels and instances of the social formation it animates” (1990, 101). Outside the confines of a unidirectional teleology and beyond a merely reciprocal dialectic, each historical moment, Althusser explains, is thus a “fusion” of apparently unconnected events or an “accumulation of ‘circumstances’ and ‘currents’” (1990, 99). The accumulation of currents binds separate events and gives shape to the world, amounting to a discursive process whereby energy runs through and connects an event to different, sometimes isolated and often unrecognized, moments comprising its overdetermination. In contrast to a linear economic determinism that splits subject and object or economics and politics, this approach posits an affective connectivity. Affect acts as an energy
moving between human beings via communicative practices that inspire behavior instinctively. Affect, in the form of something as taken for granted as a gut sense, exerts pressure on our decision making and does not crumble under the deliberative weight of better arguments or more information. As a continuous process linking disparate actions, sensations, and events, affect operates within a transsituational and transhistorical structure and energizes our habituated movements as well as our commonsensical beliefs.

From this perspective, rhetoric is not an isolated instance or even a series of instances but a circulation of exchanges, the whole of which govern our individual and collective decisions. Understanding rhetoric as circulating within an overdetermined ecological space helps illuminate the biopolitical reaches of contemporary capital, while the social connectivity of affective energy produced through communicative labor helps explain the persuasive capacity of these reaches.

THE NEOLIBERAL MILIEU: AN OVERDETERMINED RHETORICAL ECOLOGY

Forty years ago, Lloyd Bitzer asked a crucial and still pressing question: what circumstances lead us to create rhetorical discourse? In answering his question, he essentially asserted that rhetoric comes into being because material problems require discursive intervention in order to be properly resolved. Bitzer claimed that historical context gives birth to a rhetorical situation if a complex of people and events create “an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about . . . significant modification of the exigence” (1968, 6). As long as the future is uncertain and policies are open to change, diverse historical phenomena will function as exigencies inviting rhetorical responses. If we apply Bitzer’s kairotic notion of historical context to the discourse of economic crisis, then the urgent tone of President Obama’s press conference explaining his economic recovery and reinvestment plan can be understood as an appropriate response to the financial uncertainties of our present moment. On the other hand, applying the theory of Richard E. Vatz, who rejects the idea of an a priori rhetorical situation and suggests that history comes into existence through rhetorical exchanges, would result in an entirely different explanation. According to Vatz’s view, the speech, the plummeting stock market indices on our television screens,
rhetorical circulation in late capitalism

and constant references to the failure of subprime mortgages interpret the historical moment as an economic crisis—they create this reality rather than respond to it. Thus, Bitzer and Vatz position rhetoric at opposite ends of the cause-and-effect spectrum, prodding us to explore further the relationship between material reality and rhetorical production.

Although many rhetoricians have taken up this call to examine the source, direction, and structure of rhetoric’s historical causation, the remarkable resonance between this exigence-rhetoric debate and the Marxist notion of an economic base and its cultural superstructure has been virtually ignored. Yet when Vatz argues that one’s rhetorical choices create the situation, he unwittingly rubs up against the long history in Marxist theory of haggling over this base-superstructure relationship. Just as Vatz accuses Bitzer of believing “there is an intrinsic nature in events from which rhetoric inexorably follows” (1973, 155), poststructuralists accuse Marxists of assuming that specific human relationships in the superstructure follow directly from particular modes of economic production. Vatz and poststructural theorists hold the opposite belief: rhetoric or cultural discourse produces the exigence or material world. Not only do these debates tend to endorse one or another site of epistemic and ontological origination—rhetoric/culture or situation/economy—they also implicitly privilege certain fields of study. Indeed, Vatz makes this explicit when he bemoans the fact that “if you view meaning as intrinsic to situations, rhetorical study becomes parasitic to philosophy, political science, and whatever other discipline can inform us as to what the ‘real’ situation is” (1973, 157–58). He claims instead that “a rhetorical basis of meaning requires a disciplinary hierarchy with rhetoric at the top” (1973, 158). Rather than compete with others (who are supposedly more qualified) to define reality, rhetoricians, he says, should focus on rhetoric: rhetoricians should study discursive choices and their persuasive ability without inserting ideas about truth into their analyses, thereby contaminating rhetorical insights with political biases. Vatz’s insistence on the myth of the rhetorical situation makes good sense within a liberal worldview wherein subjects are understood to occupy clearly defined and self-contained spaces of rhetorical inquiry that permit close textual analysis and provide critical insight into the work of persuasion separate from the purportedly external concerns of historical, political, or material reality. But such criticism falters when confronted with a neoliberal worldview that understands textuality as shot through with heterogeneous governing technologies.
Although rhetoricians acknowledge some of these governing arts by way of rhetoric’s situatedness, they tend to position rhetoric as a supergoverning force that imposes order and tames power relations according to its own agenda. The differences between Bitzer’s and Vatz’s take on rhetoric can thus be attributed to their different understanding of its ordering power: Bitzer views historical or material reality as determinate; Vatz regards discourse as determinant. Both interpretations, however, ground rhetoric within a communicative agency—either historical agency or human agency—circumscribed within a liberal logic of one-to-one influence or cause and effect. Indeed, almost all interventions into the rhetorical situation hinge on the question of rhetorical agency. Richard L. Larson calls for further precision in defining the rhetorical situation (1970), asking questions about the actions it initiates, the probability of it effecting change, the degree of urgency, the importance of success, and the consequences for the future; David M. Hunsaker and Craig R. Smith extend the boundaries of the rhetorical situation to account for how issues are discursively constructed (1976); John H. Patton defends the situated notion of rhetoric by distinguishing between fatalism and determinism and emphasizing the inherently creative aspect of rhetorical invention (1979); Scott Consigny mediates between Bitzer and Vatz by similarly recalling rhetoric as an art of invention that must remain open to a range of possibilities (1974); Kathleen M. Hall Jamieson opposes the idea that invention is wholly open ended by identifying the restrictions imposed by historically similar events and the generic conventions of such antecedent discourses (1973); and, recently, Karen A. Foss queered the rhetorical situation by illustrating the contradictory process through which Harvey Milk acquired his popular political following (2007). Whether aligned with Bitzer, Vatz, or a theorist in between, criticism based on the rhetorical situation taps into human or historical agency in a world that is classified, categorized, and disciplined along geometric matrices, a theoretical map outpaced by capitalism’s ability to cross boundaries, change its identification strategies, and thrive within the overdetermined spaces of contemporary neoliberalism.

To be sure, the deficiency of this conception of fixed agents working within a predetermined world has been readily acknowledged, as theorists attempt to mediate between Bitzer’s historical and Vatz’s discursive agency. Barbara Biesecker, for instance, argues that the rhetorical situation as conceived by either Bitzer or Vatz assumes audiences that are fully formed and unified, ignoring the fact that rhetoric constructs and deconstructs identities. Alternatively, she defines the rhetorical situation as
rhetorical circulation in late capitalism

an identity-producing event and proposes that we use Jacques Derrida’s thematic of *diff érance* to rethink rhetoric’s situatedness through a theory of articulation. Fluctuating articulations, she says (1989, 112), enable the “provisional and practical outcome of a symbolic engagement between speaker and audience,” allowing the rhetorical situation to become reconceived as “a trajectory of becoming rather than Being” (1989, 127). The importance of this intervention notwithstanding, articulation theory remains a dichotomized conceptualization of relationships—articulations cohere firmly between speakers and audiences even though the linkage is temporary and contingent. In other words, an articulation, as a single, isolated exchange between speaker and audience within a specified location, does not take into account what Althusser calls “the ‘fusion’ of an ‘accumulation’ of contradictions” (1990, 90), which connects a given situation to diverse people, places, and histories. The connection between two disarticulated entities does not simply disappear with new articulations; on the contrary, that connectivity remains copresent within an overdetermined structure that encompasses transtohistorical and transsituational moments. As Althusser’s notion of overdetermination insists, meaning is constructed circuitously and acquires its value from a connective energy pulsing through society. To move beyond liberal limitations that bind meaning to discrete locations and to linear models of causation, we need to reconceptualize rhetorical phenomena within an ecology of overdetermination.

Eschewing the liberal cartographic impulse of situations and articulations, political theorists Julie Graham and Katherine Gibson suggest that we give up representations of space that rely on physical groundings, locational grids with fixed points, and clear boundedness. They endorse, instead, the spatial imaginary of the *ch óra* (2006, 83), “the term Plato uses to denote the space of movement between being and becoming.” Neither material nor rational but dreamlike, the *ch óra* signifies the indefinable milieu in which identities come to be. In such a space, actions and connections manifest instinctually, uninhibited by the imposition of logical ordering schemas. People come together in a way that doesn’t depend on identification, and ideas propel action independently of planned strategies and locatable exigencies. Such a space, to paraphrase Ronald Walter Greene, affirms life by releasing rhetoric from its agentive anxieties and giving itself over to the imminent potential in all its practices. Against the imaginary divisions imposed by the linear spatial logics of concepts like the rhetorical situation, Thomas Richert likewise advances the *ch óra* as a way to understand how “sensations, and other marks and traces of psychical and material
experience” factor into our decision-making processes beyond pathetic appeals designed to motivated clearly defined subjectivities (2007, 260–61). If we move from the logical and bounded place of rhetorical situatedness into the chōra, he believes mood, feeling, memory, and “sociopolitical negotiation, to create but a short list of possible phenomena, would then need to be factored” into our sense of how individual and collective decisions acquire meaning (2007, 262).

In her reconceptualization of the rhetorical situation, Jenny Edbauer develops a concept similar to this notion of chōra and offers a useful way of describing the affective circulation of rhetoric within the neoliberal moment. She suggests that rhetoric functions through a network of flowing, circulating, and exchanging connections rather than as a LEGO-like assembly that snaps parts together into a whole. While others identify clearly located coordinates and suture them together into an inanimate complex, Edbauer envisions rhetoric as a living environment. She defines rhetorical space as an ecology in which discursive events are “held together transsituationally” and are “the effects of trans-situationality on rhetorical circulation” (2005, 20). Rhetoricians misstep, she says, when they attempt to identify a specific exigency because constantly evolving exigencies are neither singular nor static. Like the chōra, these metamorphosing exigencies are not discrete situations: they encompass more than a collection of single situations that can be named, classified, and positioned. Rhetorical work emerges simultaneously at multiple sites through a sometimes inaudible and asynchronous dialogue. In this Althusserian sense, rhetoric is an overdetermined space because no one situation affects future outcomes by itself: each situation contributes to change by collaborating with past beliefs, current (though often unclearly linked) instantiations, and imagined possibilities. Acknowledging this overdetermination means accepting that “we are never outside the networked interconnection of forces, energies, rhetorics, modes, and experiences. In other words, our practical consciousness is never outside the prior and ongoing structures of feeling that shape the social field” (Edbauer 2005, 20). Edbauer’s rhetorical ecology allows us to replace our liberal belief in the social world as a collection of sites that adds up to some rational whole—the rhetorical situation—with a neoliberal understanding of the social as a living totality of events that flow, change, and cohere in both predictable and unpredictable ways—a rhetorical circulation.

If rhetorical circulation within a neoliberal milieu functions as an overdetermined ecological field, then rhetoric contains an allusive component that moves throughout this space, connecting people, events, and
rhetorical circulation in late capitalism

things. In other words, rhetorical circulation implies that some element moves throughout material and discursive spaces to connect the differently situated moments comprising its organic whole. Unintentionally hinting at this connective source, George Kennedy’s discussion of comparative rhetorics identifies communication’s persuasive quality as an energy. Because the impulse toward rhetorical deliberation functions almost instinctually, he speculates that rhetoric might be understood as “the mental or emotional energy that impels the speaker to expression, the energy level coded in the message, and the energy received by the recipient who then uses mental energy in decoding and perhaps acting on the message” (1998, 5). While a given rhetorical exchange can be located and bound, the rhetorical energy circulating within that situation cannot. As Kennedy indicates, energy flows from speaker to text to audience, binding them together through an ongoing and fluid process that transgresses rather than adheres to boundaries. Bolstered by an overdetermined set of contradictions imbricated within that exchange, this energy requires a rhetorical situation through which it can be dispersed even as its effects will exceed any given situation. What Kennedy calls an energy, that is, might usefully be theorized as a persuasive power affectively sustaining the overdetermined ecology of our life worlds.

COMMUNICATIVE VALUE: THE CONNECTIVITY OF AFFECTIVE ENERGY

For political economists as well as language theorists, value measures the products of human labor, allows for free exchange, and ultimately secures both our economic and discursive systems. Value, such theorists agree, does not reside in isolated instances of exchange but comes into existence through circulation, a process that connects multiple moments through the dynamics of living relationships. According to Karl Marx, for instance, the circulation of commodities is essential to the economic valorization process. Surplus value is created through wage labor but cannot be realized without the “constantly renewed movement” of commodities (Marx 1990, 253); in other words, without an ongoing and expanding circulation process, there can be no end profit. Capital, Marx insists, is an autonomous social totality, a living relationship, metabolized from the multiplication and repetition of a cycle that “begins from an infinite number of points and returns to an infinite number of points” (1973, 195). Innumerable moments of value exchange collectively constitute the life of capital: workers give value to the products they produce; employers pay workers for their value-added
labor; and customers pay for commodities whose value they consume. I suggest a similar claim can be made about rhetoric: its persuasive power can be seen as deriving from the repetition of values added and exchanged through disparate communicative acts. Indeed, I maintain that the economic and rhetorical circulatory processes work in tandem to sustain the vitality of late capitalism in much the same way that the muscular and skeletal systems work together to animate human motion. Circulating material values, which form the backbone of capitalist production, are attached to the affective energies circulating through communicative exchanges, providing connective tissue and giving motion to the economy’s skeletal framework.

According to Greene’s reconceptualization, rhetoric produces value through its life-affirming labor; consequently, rhetorical value has less to do with historical truth or a text’s inherent qualities and more to do with the circulation process. Just like economic value, rhetorical value is achieved through the circulation of its many transhistorical and transsituational exchanges and just as money measures economic value, affect measures rhetorical value. Cultural theorist Sara Ahmed explains that “signs increase in affective value as an effect of the movement between signs: the more signs circulate, the more affective they become” (2004, 45). This increase in affective energy of signs results in the habituation of beliefs and behaviors, a habituation that overrides fitting responses, individual interests, and ideological encoding or decoding. Teresa Brennan’s work on affect supports such a speculation. She theorizes affect as an always present and surging circuit of life energies and conjectures that affect moves between individuals, raising and lowering energy levels. Affect, or what she calls the carrier of energy, travels between people vis-à-vis communicative exchanges and ties them together through a “process that is social in origin but biological and physical in effect” (2004, 3). Affect physically moves through our bodies—sensed as intuitions, gut feelings, ideas, and beliefs that grip us regardless of precise facts—and helps constitute our socially constructed life practices. These affective sensations circulate continuously throughout communicative exchanges and map out our connections, disjunctures, and familiar conduct.

Political and social crises emerge from an interruption in the rhetorical energies that sustain our structures of feeling, knowing, and experiencing the world. For instance, when governing apparatuses threaten the circulation of a sign that has become valuable—like the Confederate flag—people respond instinctually. The Confederate flag serves as a deeply affecting sign for many rural, white Southerners, who identify their patriotism and history through it. Insistence that the flag represents a break with national
unity tied to a desire to maintain a slave economy does not penetrate this affective energy. Nevertheless, southern proponents of the Confederate flag are not irrational. They are energized through an affectivity that cannot be described in terms of rationality or irrationality. As a result of myriad dispersed exchanges, discourses like those tied to the southern Confederacy become highly valuable (and thus important to a group’s social survival), while other less-circulated discourses remain relatively unimportant to social reproduction. These valuations are determined by a circulation process that functions independent of rational deliberation, even if it overlaps with and gets absorbed by various political discourses.

In this sense, the value of human communication derives from its circulation of affect, a material energy exchanged within and among the many instances of a sign’s lifespan. This persuasive energy, as Brian Massumi says (2002a, 232), “changes how people experience what potentials they have to go and to do.” Affect moves through individuals vis-à-vis discourse, making them more and less energized. Affect can be used to open one’s worldview to other ideas, or it can be used to sustain one’s worldview; it can be life affirming, inspiring new actions in the world, or it can be life constricting, sapping energy and limiting new possibilities. Positive affective energies increase our potential openness to life and its possibilities; negative affective energies decrease our capacity for such openness. Negative affects, Brennan argues, uphold “the principle of fixation, which institutes and maintains the arrangement of energy from one’s own standpoint, an arrangement that interrupts, severs, and diverts the energy arranged by the creative laws of life” (2004, 157). Consequently, the Confederate flag maintains its strong value through frequent circulation even though that valuation reproduces negative affective energy, rooting individuals to familiar spaces and quarantining them from other possible modes of understanding.

Affective energies, regardless of whether they open up or close down individual capacities to affect and be affected by the labor of communication, operate on an entirely different level than rational deliberation and self-interested choice. Affective energy precedes our conscious decisions, cajoling us into habituated movements that are valorized through repetition and that are separate from our “slower linguistic consciousness, which formulates the reasons for our actions, [and] claims intentionality after the fact” (Brennan 2004, 146). After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, for example, concerns about individual and national security first insinuated themselves into our life activities affectively, as both Dana Cloud (2003) and Bradford Vivian (2006) illustrate. Security concerns worked affectively
to bind disparate individuals according to neoliberal governing practices wherein the state falls “under the supervision of the market” (Foucault 2008, 313). When the state was threatened by anti-American terrorism, the response was to maintain the circulation of economic value, which required the simultaneous circulation of affective energies inspiring people to participate in these economic exchanges. Repeated discourses implored the population to donate time and money to the relief effort; to shop their way into nationalism; to fly as a demonstration of an unfailing American unity; to pass legislation designed to “smoke out” the terrorists among us; to carry out military attacks on countries that harbor terrorists; and to wage preemptive war against countries that might pose threats to our safety. Instead of deriving their power through rational deliberation about personal safety (a process that took years to emerge in the mainstream public), these initial post-9/11 discourses secured their value from the circulation of affective energies designed to maintain appropriate security ratios: market indices, employment rates, rates of profit, and rates of resource availability. The affective exchanges produced within these discourses triggered our capacities to act, but they did so through negative energies that delimited possibilities around fixed meaning structures, dimming our ability to engage other creative potentials.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that capitalism exclusively circulates negative affective energies. Internally dynamic, capitalism relies on a valuation process that circulates negative energies to keep us within its static modalities as well as positive energies to pull us within its changing modalities. Its discourses, therefore, are part of a paradoxical structure that is attuned to the constantly changing needs of capitalism. Thus American citizens can be scolded for not saving, overextending their finances, and creating the mortgage crisis at the same time that they are strategically infused with tax rebates and stimulus packages and instructed to build, to hire, and to buy. Different sides of the same coin, these apparently contradictory directives have their operating logics in security, the governing rationale of neoliberalism. Accordingly, neither saving nor spending is inherently good because security requires balanced ratios and social norms pegged to calculable circulation processes. Overspending and its attendant discourses work as long as money circulates, but financial saving and its attendant discourses become important when that circulation process falters, placing the ratios of a secure population into jeopardy. Critical rhetorical methods that analyze discourse for its mobilizing truths (what Greene calls the hermeneutic approach) or for its ability to secure rights from power structures (what
Greene calls the social movement approach) account for rational logics and disciplinary powers but not for the affective circulations that enable technologies of security to function in the milieu of late capitalism.\textsuperscript{13}

In neoliberalism, argues Foucault (2008, 13), political economic theory serves as the gauge for legitimate personal and state activities such that our sense of economy and its operations supersedes other logical arguments. Economic beliefs determine, for instance, who can buy a home and at what interest rate or which corporations can file for bankruptcy, which must liquidate, and which require federal bailout packages. Amid a severe decline in the economy, such political economic policies and the arguments that legitimate them may appear to rhetoricians to be situated in a sociohistorical moment specific to the economic crisis of global capitalism. Certainly this historical context and its particular manifestations in local sites like Erkhart, Indiana, where the unemployment rate has recently skyrocketed, tells us something about how to persuade the traditionally republican residents of this middle-America town to endorse various political and economic agendas. But this context falls short of explaining sentiments like the one expressed by an unnamed working-class man captured on Alexandra Pelosi's documentary \textit{Right America Feeling Wronged} (2009). In a rare moment of personal interaction with one of her interlocutors, Pelosi challenges the man's understanding of Obama's tax redistribution plan as unfairly burdening “the hard-working man” and benefiting “the guy that only wants to come to work two days a week.” She tells him, on the contrary, that the plan would likely increase taxes for “the richest one percent in this country and give it to you.” Although the man had initially explained his opposition to Obama in terms of his own economic self-interest, he responds to Pelosi by stating, “I don't care what people can do for me. I only care what’s good for the economy.” This seemingly innocuous and selfless comment reveals the negative affective energies that fix this man's opinion of Obama regardless of well-crafted appeals. He does not dislike Obama because he is thinking only of his economic self-interest, or because he's unhappy about the way economic self-interest is discursively represented by the Obama campaign, or because he lacks information, or because he's irrational. With a clear voice, a sincere tone, and after carefully listening to Pelosi, the man maintains his distrust of Obama because of deeply affective energies attached to notions about economic competition that literally prevent him from communicating with those who do not share his understanding of how the world works, precluding him, in fact, from connecting with others and entertaining new possibilities.
The function of neoliberalism within late capitalism, as this example illustrates, cannot be understood fully by comparing rational arguments about state deregulation, open trade, and privatized industries with the often devastating results of such policies. If it could, those rhetoricians working within a critical tradition could assess a situation through exigencies, constraints, and audience expectations; using such information, they could construct a persuasive discourse that would compel those in power to exert their agency and forge more appropriate economic systems. Yet such a model misses the circulation of affective energy, making it incapable of assessing the transsituatuatedness of rhetoric as well as of evaluating how we do and do not allow ourselves to be open to others. Critical rhetoricians need a model of rhetoric that can begin to account for these theoretical gaps, one that replaces situation with circulation and thus reconfigures the rhetorical elements to which we give our attention.

RHETORICAL CIRCULATION IN LATE CAPITALISM: A CRITICAL MODEL

Bitzer’s conception of the rhetorical situation has stood the test of time. It has been has been challenged, defended, extended, diversified, and queered, and its repeated circulation among the diverse locations of rhetorical scholarship has secured for it a great deal of value. 14 Canonized within our textbooks and used to explore political issues as well as cultural studies and economic inquiries, rhetoric’s situatuatedness serves as one of the field’s primary foundations. This success notwithstanding, I believe that the premise of a rhetorical situation to which language responds, although an extremely valuable disciplinary tool, circulating an affectivity that makes rhetoricians less open to the full range of human interconnectivity primarily because it posits effective communication as a bounded practice. The rhetorical situation, that is, makes rhetoricians comfortable within the disciplinary status quo of rhetorical production understood as transpiring within discrete sociohistorical, political, and cultural situations. The negative affectivity of the rhetorical situation—its organization and interpretation of life structures in terms of fixed origins—stems, in part, from its reproduction of philosophical divisions: materiality and consciousness; reason and emotion; objects and subjects; past and future; the situated place and the open space. Opposed to the idea of the rhetorical situation, which relies on a dialectical conception wherein history moves forward through a clash of contradictions, is an
understanding of dialectical overdeterminism as a transsituatied and transhistorical collection of multiple contradictions held together by the value of human labor and the circulation of affective energies. I believe this revision of rhetoric’s structure as well as its persuasive force better account for the neoliberal milieu of late capitalism, inviting a transformation of our guiding model from situated rhetoric to rhetorical circulation.

Situatedness, long upheld as the strength of rhetoric, enables many elements of late capitalism to go underinterrogated because they do not exist in a location but in the connective tissues of affectivity passing through locations. The affective energies maintaining contemporary life do not adhere to the boundedness of rhetorical situations; rather, they move across gaps from situation to situation, acting as “the invisible glue that holds the world together” (Massumi 2002b, 217). In the world defined by such overdetermination, it becomes necessary, as Smith and Lybarger argue, to “re-orient Bitzer’s model to account for multiple exigencies, multiple audiences, and the plethora of constraints they impose on or derive from any situation” (1996, 210). Accepting the validity of multiple centers with gaps between them is only the first step; the second step is to find a way to move among and pull together these differently situated moments. To do this, we must also make connections across spaces previously thought to be separate, if not independent. As Althusser says, society experiences itself “through all the echoes of the essence it has previously been, and through all the allusive presence of the corresponding historical forms” (1990, 101). These echoes of the past and allusive present are felt—often without attendant nominalizations—more so than they are spoken, heard, or seen. As the rhetorical energies surging throughout the concrete sites of our contemporary world, these echoes are experienced affectively in ways that orient our social connectivity. To focus on the circulation of affective energies entails that rhetorical success can no longer be measured in quantifiable terms like votes, policies, and dollars but only through an indeterminant sociality, “the coming-together or belonging-together of processually unique and divergent forms of life” (Massumi 2002b, 255). In the rhetorical circulation model, success derives from a better understanding of differently situated positions and an enhanced ability to engage differently situated people, processes that open dialogue rather than win debates. I end with a sketch of this alternative model for rhetorical inquiry outlined in the chart below, which substitutes the rhetorical situation and its guiding elements (listed in the second column) with the idea of rhetorical circulation and its guiding elements (listed in the third column).
The rhetorical situation, our traditional model, has a structure wherein an urgent problem necessitates rhetoric for its solution. In such a configuration, the rhetor appeals to audiences whom he or she believes have the authority to fix the problem. These audience appeals presume static identities to whom one can carefully craft messages. Political campaigns, for instance, market candidates to different audiences using only those messages determined to be most salient to each niche group. Believing that the primary constraint facing candidates is the ideological situatedness or self-interest of different voters and addressing audiences through their own terministic screens, marketers take for granted that individuals rigidly identify with one or another way of seeing the world. They work from the assumption that appropriate rhetorical choices will ignite political agency within audiences, who will then act accordingly. This system rests on a liberal philosophy that accepts causality and that appeals to the idea of materially or ideologically fixed positions. While the rhetorical situation does admit an uncertain future and does position rhetoric as an art, it works through a fairly rigid grid of determinacy embedded within bounded sites of exchange that cannot account for the beliefs people hold through sensed experiences that do not necessarily align with clear surface logics—beliefs that are affective habituations rather than ideological errors.

Rhetorical circulation, on the other hand, views rhetoric as always connected to the overdetermined transsituational and transhistorical dialectics informing our life practices. Rhetorical circulation gives up the causal relationship between rhetoric and materiality, believing instead that rhetoric circulates through our everyday, situated activities and does not exist in any one place: it is always passing through, but it is never located. The exigency of rhetoric, therefore, shifts from urgent problems to everyday life activities. While identities can, no doubt, become fixed, this model maintains that such fixity results from the increased valuation
of negative affects that produce and reproduce the world within strict meaning structures. This rigidity can be softened through positive affects that enable individuals to see the world from multiply-situated vistas. From this perspective, audiences always have fluid identities, even if they are in a repetitive loop of becoming the same. The constraints imposed by ideological positionalities metamorphose when we understand rhetoric as circulating rather than situated. Rhetorical circulation functions through constant motion in multiple exchanges throughout an evolving ecological space of signifying and becoming. If we imagine the world as this dynamic affective space, it becomes impossible to have or hold ideologies. Massumi summarizes this by explaining that “what you are, affectively, isn’t a social classification—rich or poor, employed or unemployed—it’s a set of potential connections and movements that you have, always in an open field of relations. What you can do, your potential, is defined by your connectedness, the way you’re connected and how intensely—not your ability to separate off and decide for yourself” (2002a, 238). To understand rhetorical constraints as determined by affect rather than ideology means that we do not have to shape our discourse through someone else’s imaginary, nor do we have to change that imaginary. The new goal is simply to increase communicative exchanges that circulate positive affects—to deliberate in such a way that we all become more open to the world’s creative potential.

The circulation model I advocate supplements rather than replaces the situation model, helping to explain the persistence of habituated practices outside of traditional identification structures. With the transition from rhetorical situation to rhetorical circulation, we lose what Greene identified as our perpetual anxiety over agency and learn to embrace the production of value inherent in all communicative exchanges; simultaneously, we reduce our disciplinary anxieties, which impose correct definitions, histories, and practices of rhetoric as a distinct field of knowledge, by connecting rhetorical inquiries to other knowledge productions—philosophical, political economic, psychological, and physiological, to name only the most obvious. In many ways, the traditional rhetorical situation orients rhetoric in the direction of such connectivity. Bitzer’s rhetorical situation requires knowledges that help us understand situations as well as knowledges that inform us about the best course of action demanded by those situations. It offers a grounding framework for critical rhetoricians interested in exploring the neoliberal dynamics of contemporary capitalism, which endures because its fluctuating structure organically energizes people into fixity and fluidity according to the economy’s evolving needs. A rhetorical relationship to
Catherine Chaput

capitalism, therefore, requires not only multiple disciplinary knowledges but also an internal dynamic that matches the ongoing rhythms of capital. Such a relationship might begin by unhinging our fixed attachment to situations as we explore the circulation of positive affective energies—pathways that invite human connectivity and constitute knowledge as an ongoing, creative pursuit.

University of Nevada, Reno

NOTES

1. I would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers for Philosophy & Rhetoric for their insightful comments.

2. Interestingly, seventeenth-century arguments that first endorsed economic self-interest conceptualized it as a unique hybrid of reason and emotion. Economic self-interest was understood "as the passion of self-love upgraded and contained by reason, and as reason given direction and force by that passion" (Hirschman 1977, 43). The ambiguous duality of economic interestedness, however, disappeared in the liberal thought of the eighteenth century, when political theorists began to conceive of economics as a science. This liberal binary between economic rationalism and cultural emotionalism continues to haunt much of our current political economic understanding.

3. Wendy Brown, who believes that political economic neoliberalism will suffocate liberal democracy, similarly argues for the need to oppose its stifling grip through new frameworks rather than a weddedness to our old liberal positions (2003).

4. Foucault traces neoliberalism to the German Frieburg School economists, who believed that state politics produce irrational excesses that need to be curbed through market rationality. Their brand of neoliberalism mirrors the Frankfurt School’s criticism of mass-produced irrationality but attributes it to the state rather than the culture industries and thus favors the rational private sphere free from state regulations (2008, 102–6). The Frieburg School influenced American neoliberalism as advanced by Milton Friedman and the Chicago School by way of theorists such as Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich von Hayek and the Mont Perelin Society.

5. Over the last thirty years, such practices of neoliberalism have resulted in the redistribution of wealth among the highest brackets of income earners and an attendant concentration of power among those economic elite. For an excellent overview of economic neoliberalism on the world stage, see David Harvey’s A Brief History of Neoliberalism (2005).

6. Foucault discusses the shift from disciplinary power and its emphasis on normalization toward biopolitical power and its emphasis on normation as well as the relationship between the two, contending that while biopower becomes more prominent in neoliberalism, it does not replace disciplinary power (2007, 56–57).
rhetorical circulation in late capitalism

7. Although I am relying on Greene’s critique of the agentive trap of rhetoric’s communication model, many other communication theorists have been trying to work out a new understanding of language’s suasive functions that goes beyond analyzing the semiotics of encoding and decoding meaning. The two most prominent alternative accounts are affect—see, for instance, Grossberg 1992, Hardt 1999, and Negri 1999—and governmentality—see, for instance, Ouellette and Hay 2008 and Andrejevic and Hay 2006.

8. Agency, whether it exists with rhetors or audience members, references the ability to act on knowledge. Such a configuration makes rhetoricians perennially anxious about having the correct knowledge and arranging it properly. I am interested, instead, in the value circulating within communicative exchanges. This value derives its power from affective energy circulating among people rather than from perfectly executed appeals.


10. In a recent reflection on the debate surrounding the rhetorical situation, Vatz has reiterated his argument that the “situation” is always an invention of rhetoric and not something to which it merely responds. He also suggests that the situation approach, which he opposes, is “more easily used to promote a political point of view—usually liberal when the scholar is in academia—whereas the rhetorical approach encourages more disinterested analysis and criticism” (2009, 4–5).

11. In Timaeus, Plato’s treatise on the creation of the physical world, he expresses considerable doubt about absolute knowledge as well as absolute communication (2001, 84). His description of the chōra works in tandem with the concept of overdetermination because it offers a space for coming to know and for attempting to communicate without adherence to an absolute model.

12. I subscribe to Massumi’s definition of affect as a physical energy transferred between individuals through communicative processes. This definition is upheld by other theorists of affect such as Teresa Brennan, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and Kathleen Stewart. I rely on these theorists because they stress the circulation of affect as a distinct process that should not be confused with emotional responses. For them, affect takes place prior to our translation of that bodily sensation into the language of emotions.

13. Greene identifies two schools of thought on rhetoric and capitalism: James Arnt Aune’s hermeneutic approach and Dana Cloud’s social movement approach. Another approach that remains equally trapped within this political-communicative model wherein correct speech becomes the guarantor of political economic rights is Deirdre McCloskey’s, which uses rhetoric to endorse rather than critique capitalism.

14. Even Richard Vatz who attributes a mythical status to Bitzer’s situation (2009, 2), recently admitted that “if the competition between the two perspective has been a 35-year footrace, it has been won by Bitzer’s philosophy.” The competition metaphor, which prevails throughout his discussion of knowledge production, is interesting in light of Foucault’s observation that neoliberalism is characterized by its ability to transform all life activities into competitions.
While there is much theoretical overlap between ideology and affect, the differences between them are instructive. Ideology can be unmasked with better information, whereas affect often remains unchanged even in the face of compelling contrary facts. Ideology is often associated with a subject position that can be identified on a grid of social differences, while affect cuts across and through social differences. Ideology functions as a noun—one has or holds ideologies—whereas affect is also a verb describing a relation between and among people.

WORKS CITED


rhetorical circulation in late capitalism


Pelosi, Alexandra. 2009. The Right Feeling Wronged: Some Voices from the Campaign Trail. HBO.


