Paying Attention

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Christian Marazzi. *Capital and Language: From the New Economy to the War Economy*. Translated by Gregory Conti. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008. US$14.95 (trade paperback), 180 pp. ISBN 10-1-58435-067-9/ISBN-13: 978-1-58435-067-5

The English translation of *Capital and Language* comes at a juncture that is enormously revealing—both for Christian Marazzi's work, and of the late capitalist formations he studies. Encountering this book is even more illuminating now, because we are in a position to evaluate Marazzi's arguments about the post-Fordist "New Economy" in ways that extend beyond the novel problems presented by the high-tech and internet boom at the turn of the 21st Century. This is, of course, thanks to the global financial and economic crisis that precipitated the staggering meltdown of late 2008. The housing bubble and its attendant speculation in the mortgage securities market do indeed throw Marazzi's argument into sharp relief, particularly his thesis that the financialization of the economy has a fundamentally linguistic character. On a theoretical level, Marazzi proves particularly topical, as political economy's two standard theories of value (the neoclassical utility theory and the Marxist labor theory) are increasingly regarded as bearing fatal analytical and ontological flaws. Marazzi's account takes steps in the direction of rethinking value, managing along the way to breathe critical theoretical life into the economic clichés of the turn of the 21st Century (e.g., "the knowledge economy") and connect them to concerns that surfaced a decade later (e.g., "financialization").

Marazzi's account of financialization is a fitting point of departure for discussing this book, since it is the work's principal focus and a source of great political and theoretical interest today. For most commentators, financialization means the shift from a real economy to a speculative one, corporations' increasing (if not exclusive) focus on shareholder value, and the push to securitize all assets. Marazzi's discussion of these patterns combines familiar elements in a way that serves as a useful correction, however, to the recent view of financialization that emphasizes the 1999 dismantling of Glass-Steagall. Marazzi reminds us of the relentlessly disinflationary policy regime that began in the 1980s. He characterizes the push toward disinflation as a response to both the abandonment of the gold standard in 1971 and stagflation in the late 1970s. He describes how the change in workers' compensation from salaries and pensions to stock-options and 401(k) accounts over the subsequent decades played critical, if underappreciated roles in disinflationary policy programs, and therefore in the process of financialization.

This shift in the structure of earnings and savings for a critical segment of the working population is momentous. Marazzi explains how it eliminated a great deal of savings that were previously invested outside of financial markets, and it fostered a "deep, vast market" with lots of liquidity. It also dramatically broadened the class of investors, a process he calls the "socialization of finance" ("socialization" here meaning something like "compulsory participation"). In a vein mined directly from Negri and Hardt, he goes on to argue that financialization shifted from governmental institutions to financial ones the power to constitute peoples out of multitudes, since it is in financial markets, rather than in government-regulated pension plans and in welfare state programs, that people come to imagine their futures.

Throughout this analysis, Marazzi, like many before and after him, departs decisively from the idea (endemic to dominant paradigms in economic theory) that price expresses total information. Of course, the refusal of mainstream economists and policymakers to follow Marazzi and his kind has visited us with consequences that are by now all too familiar. While Marazzi draws from the literatures on behavioral finance to justify discarding the rationality assumption, he follows the linguistic turn, broadly understood, to orient his account. To this end, Marazzi begins with the observation that the economy is not nature, but culture: economic things are by and large conventional. They are, in a word, language. Extending the linguistic rubric to refigure the way we think about finance and capital, and sensitive to the ways that a financialized economy can pervert or distort these conventions, Marazzi adumbrates what he sees as the self-referential nature of financial markets, particularly in the New Economy. As the conventional dimensions of the economy intensify with financialization, prices are revealed not to refer to value located elsewhere. Value is unknown, inherently speculative; what other people do offers conspicuous clues to it. Therefore, "financialization depends on *mimetic rationality*," he writes, "a kind of herd behavior based on the information deficit of individual investors" (21). The logic here is by now well-known to us: many people acting *as though* the market represents value has consequences *as such*. A crisis in the financial markets, he says, must be understood as a crisis in the overproduction of this self-referentiality. At some point, the *question* of whether market value refers to real value begins to circulate (e.g., in the media), and crisis commences.

The financialization of the economy, he argues, allowed US consumer spending to grow even as crises spread throughout debtor nations around the world (in the Euro Zone in 1993, Mexico 1994–95, and Asia 1997). Marazzi describes how, in the earlier Fordist era, the economy faced a crisis at the points when demand could not keep up with dramatically accelerating commodity production. We are familiar with the Fordist response. Externally, crises demanded imperialism to maintain, as a Global South, countries that were sources of raw materials and dumping grounds for excess consumer goods. Internally, the same crises necessitated national welfare spending to support demand. The New Economy of the 1990s promised relief from these crises, in the form of just-in-time production and supply management.

These techniques were made possible, of course, by dramatic advances in communication technology. These advances not only promised relief from commodity gluts, they also promoted the "socialization" of finance as the office-working classes gained direct access to participate in the financial markets through which their savings had been rerouted. Many of the points Marazzi makes in this account will feel straightforward to anyone familiar with the problems posed by the extent of China's financing of US debt over the past decade. What's significant here, however, is Marazzi's relatively early recognition that the process of financialization as accelerated not so much by the tech-stocks boom of the 1990s but by the technological apparatuses themselves. Personal computers and the Internet were not merely incidental to the transformation characteristic of post-Fordist economy. Rather, these machines made the cooperative financialization of the New Economy possible.

To this end, changes in the structure of work in the New Economy also intensified the linguistic saturation of capital. Marazzi discusses how the computerization of work inflected it with more flexibility, brought about the interpenetration of working and non-working time (more on this below), and fostered the increasingly linguistic character of work in the information economy. With regard to the last point in particular, Marazzi elaborates, to striking effect, an observation of Paolo Virno. What Marx called "the *general intellect,*" according to Marazzi's account of Virno, "is no longer fixed in machines, but in the *bodies* of workers" (44). Taking this idea a step further, Marazzi argues that in the New Economy, the general intellect is embodied in the ways that workers interact, rather than the material media of their interaction. Hence, I would add, the explosion of interest in social and professional networks as contributing to, in present-day corporate jargon, a worker's "value added." As information becomes a means of capitalization, so too does workers' interaction become the basic form of the general intellect. As the general intellect becomes more a character of the body of workers than of the stock of machinery, capital depends ever more on the generation of short-term profits wherever it can configure, channel, and dominate workers' interactivity.

Here Marazzi elaborates value in a way that neatly displaces both the modern Marxist's handwringing over the severance of value production from labor and the postmodern capitalist's celebration of capital as self-generating. Marazzi's thesis, which I take to be the most provocative and important among those advanced in this work, is that *attention* is the key resource of the New Economy, and therefore a crucial source of value. Attention, meaning the time and mental capacity that one can allocate to the consumption of information, is the one thing that retains value in the face of the infinite expansion of information. It is, after all, essentially limited and intrinsically scarce. Without it, information is worthless—hence the Internet economy's obsession with traffic. Marazzi makes this point without much fanfare at first, but his analysis ultimately depends on attention. Happily, this argument has much to recommend it.

The critical technological platform for financialization—the Internet, of course—intensified the erosion of boundaries between work and non-work. So doing, it set work and leisure into competition over attention; the blurring of work and non-work times and spaces, on Marazzi's account, represents exactly this competition over an intrinsically scarce resource. As does, I would add, the pop-cultural love affair with "multitasking," the present-day way of being penny wise and pound foolish. Attention must be paid, so we economize with ever smaller denominations. But we never really have enough—we always face a deficit of attention.

Attention deficit may be a disorder from the point of view of beleaguered parents and Big Pharma, but it is the new order of value in the heavily liquidated and financialized New Economy. Marazzi's centering of attention deficit is novel and important, and goes a long way to explaining developments subsequent to *Capital and Language*. Consider the evolution of the Internet in the direction of Web 2.0, and the correspondingly robust valuation of sites, like Facebook and Twitter, that produce no information of their own. They are instead massive aggregators not so much of our data, but of our attention. (Even when Facebook offers users' personal information to marketers, it does so to increase the value of advertising on Facebook.) Marazzi's idea also sheds light on the media push behind the iPad, a device which expands the reach of the information economy not *in spite of the fact* that its interface prioritizes the consumption of Internet content over its production, but *by virtue of it*. The relative comfort of the iPad (lightweight and with a large screen) increases the supply of attention available for capitalization—you can now very comfortably surf the Internet with your feet up. Marazzi's analysis provokes us away from our befuddlement at the disappearing value of information (a song or a news article can be gotten for free) and toward the recognition that, if advertising is the only intellectual work that will have any value in the near future, it will be for its ability to command—and to capitalize—attention itself. Of course, only a relatively small segment of consumers, even in the US, are affluent enough to purchase the commodities that are bent upon capitalizing on our attention in new ways. But in an economy where financialization is the dominant form of capital accumulation, these consumers take on a grossly outsized importance, because speculation on future profit depends on them.

How does Marazzi's linguistic framework for understanding the role of financialization in the New Economy speak to Marxist economics? Here, Marazzi draws on historical studies of the early modern formation of monetary systems, which argue that money is a form of social cohesion. This is an intriguing move, since if money has always been a form of social cohesion, then the New Economy represents not a break, but instead the unfolding or even realization of an inherent sociality of capital, a sociality with the potential to supersede capitalism. As we have seen, in this realization, value escapes the materiality of the machine and is (re)located instead in the body of multitude, a body whose being is bound up, for Marazzi, in language. Marxists need not pine for a return to a "real economy" in which workers press flesh against machines, because real value is already both cooperative and linguistic. The critical question becomes who appropriates *this* value, and how.

Then, of course, the question looms large: if capital is always-already cooperative and linguistic, does the socialization and dematerialization of general intellect make it easier for workers (read: the left) to mobilize? Since the intensification of the communicative apparatus is accomplished through the Internet, we have good reasons—such as those offered by Jodi Dean and others—to doubt that this will be the case. Marazzi, writing at the dawn of the Internet era, is sanguine about the possibility. He is particularly confident that crisis can be an opportunity to disrupt and remake not only the means and ends of labor's appropriation, but also present-day political forms. Injecting this optimism into the theoretical framework of Negri and Hardt, he argues that "in a strongly linguistic economic system, the crisis of a convention means the explosion of the body of the multitude, of the plurality of the individual difference which, once again, must face the, if you will, historical task of producing/electing a new convention" (36). In other words, when economic conventions are revealed by financial crises to be unfounded, they can be reworked through the linguistic general intellect (that is, in ways more fundamental than what passes as "financial reform" in the United States' Congress).

In his parting words, Marazzi seems correspondingly hopeful that the sorts of social movements represented by the WTO protests, mobilized in large part through the Internet, point the way forward. But the entrenchment of capital in the wake of the recent 'Great Recession' (to which the downturn of 2001 pales in comparison), not to mention Web 2.0 and the Tea Party phenomenon, will give today's American readers pause. Moreover, the rise of "cloud intelligence," and the steps taken by corporations like Google in the direction of exerting ownership over vast banks of these "clouds," casts doubt from another direction over the transformative possibility Marazzi sees in Virno's notion of a general intellect located not in machines but in the symbolic cooperation of workers.

Marazzi's account of language at times seems Chomskyan, with its emphasis on hard-wired and ahistorical linguistic capacities of the human organism. At other times, it veers toward the Habermasian, with its emphasis on communicative action as a nearly frictionless path of semantic interaction. For this reason, people coming to this text to understand how transformations in capital might affect how we are to think about language will come up a bit short. But Marazzi's linguistic rubric—it is too heterogeneous to call a theory—does draw together a number of themes for the articulation of political economy in strikingly illuminating ways. For this very reason, one does wonder what an account of language that does not rest upon a conception of it as a mainly biological, uniquely human capacity acting as a structuring force of production might add to

Marazzi's story. What if we were also to consider language as a destructuring force, to attend directly to its moments of subversion, slippage, in its affective power to reconstitute the social world? Marazzi's work provides a compelling starting point for this dimension of an exploration of language and capital, and the full promise of his intervention may lie in that dimly-lit terrain.