



Christian Marazzi

Capital and Affects: The Politics of the Language Economy

Translated by Giuseppina Mecchia, Semiotext(e) / the MIT Press, Los Angeles and Cambridge MA, 2011. 160pp., \$15.95 / £10.95 pb

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Reviewed by [Christian Lotz](#)

Christian Marazzi is one of the leading postoperaist political economists and has received, in recent years, in the wake of Negri, well-deserved attention. Several of his books, such as *Capital and Language* and *The Violence of Financial Capitalism*, have recently been translated into English. *Capital and Affects* appeared in Italian in 1994 (under a different title), which is a good indicator of how far the English speaking discourse fell behind the progressive and radical economic and political thought coming out of Italy during the last decades. At this point in the discussion, many concepts that this book develops have been further developed and subjected to more in depth-analyses by other philosophers and political economists, such as Negri (immaterial labor), Virno (general intellect), Moulier-Boutang (cognitive capitalism), Illouz (emotional Capitalism), and Gorz (value and labor), and therefore the book no longer offers surprising insights, but, nevertheless, given that this text was one of the initial books of the whole debate and given that it is a very readable and illuminating book, it deserves serious attention and a larger reception in the Anglophone world. Given its comments on neoliberal developments, most parts of it even sound as if they were written more recently. In addition, for the development of a genuinely *social* theory of language from a materialist point of view, its focus on communication is crucial. The book is, as the translator, Giuseppina Mecchia points out in her short Introduction, a “small classic.”

More than other authors, such as Tony Smith in his Marxist critique and analysis *Technology and Capital in the Age of Lean Production*, Marazzi focusses especially on “*communication processes* [as] the crux of today’s social and political transformations” (20). As such, he is closer to the Italian debate that quite early on focused on immaterial labor and the role of life in post-Fordism, to which Anglo-American authors did not pay much attention before the *Empire* trilogy; in addition, it is still an open question whether one of the major claims of these authors, namely, that Marx’s concept of value no longer makes sense, is justifiable or not. In line with Negri/Hardt, who claim that Marx’s concept of value is no longer needed because the entirety of human activity at all times, even outside of work places, is now being made productive (93), Marazzi claims that the “intangible assets or goods” (92) of information technology companies no longer can be measured, insofar as the (potential) wealth of companies and their ability to receive investments become increasingly dependent upon *symbolic dimensions*, *intellectual capital* and *knowledge*. We need to note, though, that Marazzi does not operate with a Marxian concept of value, since for Marx value cannot be measured in quantitative terms, inasmuch as value, for Marx, is a social relation.

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The book is divided into three parts within which Marazzi discusses communication and language, the crisis of traditional economic indicators, as well as the role of the state in our new economies. The main theme running through the entire book is best summarized in Marazzi's own words: "One understands, then, how communication – and its productive organization as information flow – has become as important as electricity once was in the age of mechanical reproduction" (21). With the increasing real abstractions in contemporary Capitalism, language, linguistic exchange, and the information flow become increasingly abstract, too, especially by operating with "symbols, signs and abstract codes" (34), which, in turn, make everything – from market exchanges to the needed communication inside stock exchanges and information *about* it – faster and more independent from the slowing down of cultural differences and cultural traditions. Accordingly, "the inclusion of communication has a directly productive value" (23), although, as Marazzi points out, the process of communication leads to contradictions, given that with the increase of communication "we are witnessing paradoxically a *crisis of communication itself*" (43).

Marazzi develops many insights into contemporary economic and social tendencies in the neoliberal area. For example, his claim that democratic citizenship will be replaced by market categories, such as customer and consumers, has recently received much more attention than when he wrote the book at the beginning of the nineties (see Wolfgang Streeck's recent contribution on citizens as customers in *The New Left Review* 76). Other tendencies, such as the rise of unemployment and poverty in the US, the increase of labor time, the suppression of "previously conquered rights," individualization of salary levels, the split between base salaries and performance-related reversible parts of salaries, and the "trend towards neo-servile work relations" (47), point to the core of current shifts within our economic system and, as Marazzi argues, to the universal "linguistic-communicative mediation innervating the *entire* economic process" (53). All this leads to the result that "industry has become closer to the service sector while the service sector has become industrialized because of its adoption of industrial productive techniques" (49). As a consequence, "cognitive-immaterial qualities" (60) are becoming increasingly important and productive, and countries need to compete over capitalizing immaterial labor in order to have a better position in the global system of "denationalized capital" (109) and international debt (112) with the by now well-known consequences, such as unbearable wealth inequalities, the instability of the financial system, and the precarious nature of labor for the lowest classes (due to the fact that they are no longer able to keep up with the central role of immaterial labor). Marazzi's take on the Clinton administration's strategies and politics proper to Neoliberalism (103-13), and his remarks on the disappearance of the middle class (116), are good reminders of how even supposedly "left" US governments are simply (proper) assimilations to the existing state of affairs, and how the same could be said about the Obama administration today, especially given its repetition of the same. Similar to other theoreticians who claim that immaterial labor, the "feminization" of work, and communicative and relational work have changed the entire field and reduced the industrial sector, Marazzi does not deal with the other tendency closely connected to the reduction of industrial work in the West, namely, the fact that in China and in other Asian countries we will soon have the largest proletarian class that ever existed on this planet, not to mention that with the exploitation of Third World countries and their natural resources, we have "observed" the "slumification" of the global South, criminal debt politics towards poor countries, and that, as a consequence, we now have the largest class of what Hegel called "rabble," which is so poor that it lives outside society. Having said this, we need to admit that at the end of his book, Marazzi acknowledges the creation of new abject classes, at least in relation to our own Western societies, when he writes: "The mass of the 'new poor' is one that can better work as guinea pigs for the new technologies of discipline and control underlying the totalitarian democracies of the future" (142). This creation of a new poor goes hand in hand with a newly emerging "spatial apartheid" (143), through which new divisions in our societies are displaced and made invisible. Marazzi's side remark that "[t]he job market is now the place of the absence of universal rights" (45) almost gets lost in his reconstruction of the immaterial in Neoliberalism, but with Marx we need to ask: was it ever in place? The decline of the welfare state, according to Marazzi, is directly related to shifting the debt to private consumers, to contradictory tasks (the State is not seen as a large investor, but still operates like a Fordist State), as well as to the State's new role of distributing knowledge rather than wealth (129).

Productivity increases can only come about through social, mainly public, investments that can no longer be overseen, understood in their complexities, or executed by classical Fordist entrepreneurs. This insight points to the central role of the connection between education, scientific research, and investment in Post-Fordist societies. One wished, though, that Marazzi would from time to time step out of his conceptual framework and include more insights that the Marxist tradition has to offer about the role and analysis of the State. For example, the analysis of the *repressive* functions of the State, such as the military, punishment institutions, and the police, receives zero attention from Marazzi and, as such, one might wonder how far Marazzi really steps outside of the liberal paradigm that he analyzes.

Despite this criticism, Marazzi's explanations of the crisis of traditional economic indicators and the reasons for the larger problems that these produce in connection with information technology are very illuminating, and they are contextualized with a myriad of small observations and remarks ranging from the "social de-responsabilization of economists" (71) and their "servile careerism," to gender related issues that the abstract nature of current economics is unable to understand or address properly. Overall, the question remains regarding whether the explosion of servile labor, the flexibility introduced by Neoliberalism, and the global expansion that make it difficult to measure productive capacities in traditional economic terms, really go back to the linguistic changes that we are observing, or whether, philosophically spoken, the real *process* behind these phenomena is *capital* rather than communication. One might critically ask, hence, whether Marazzi (and other post-operaists) confuse cause and effect. As Marx already remarked in *Grundrisse*, the expansion of the means of communication goes along with the expansion of capital, whereby both the market becomes more independent from the individual and the individual becomes more dependent upon the market. In this same work, Marx also shows how capital tends to produce a "circulation without time for circulation," claiming that this leads to the central role of time under Capitalism. Accordingly, one wonders whether, in these discussions about cognitive Capitalism, we really encounter something *genuinely* new on the *conceptual* level, despite its many important and insightful *empirical* descriptions and observations. Having said this, Marazzi is certainly correct when he claims that "the *information flows* ... are the basis of today's immaterial economy" (59), especially as these flows determine the productivity through an increase of *abstract* exchange, distribution, consumption, labor, and its organization.

Finally, the shortness with which Marazzi treats these important issues lead, sometimes, to the improper handling of other theories, especially other philosophers' theoretical insights, which might be forgivable given Marazzi's background in economics rather than in philosophy, but it still must be noted. For example, his reference to Habermas' concept of communicative action in the context of the productivity of language does not make much sense (24, 36-40), especially since he does not pay any attention to Habermas' concept of *rationality* and *normativity* that is contained within his concept of communicative action. Equally, Marazzi's short references and allusions to Hegel (33), to Heidegger's take on danger and language (44), and even to Marx's concept of class (120) remain vague at best.

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