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## Language as Work and Trade by F. Rossi-Landi

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revolution in the language of the expressive forms of the arts.

In Della Volpe, finally, the problem of *cultural heritage* is of paramount importance, as it was within the other Marxist thinkers of the century: Lucáks, Bloch, the Frankfurt school and even Antonio Gramsci. Della Volpe's awareness of the cultural heritage is present in all the theoretical formulations of his work. The attempt at a systematic integration of historical events and of the diversity of Western intellectual contributions, which E. Romagna so clearly demonstrates in his book, responds likewise to the political and moral options available to the Marxist project, ever concerned at the level of both theory and praxis with responding to what is valid in the cultural tradition of the West. But if in German thinkers the highest point of development of Western culture tends to identify itself with either the philosophical tradition or art, in Della Volpe there is posited a third plane, that of science, as fundamental to culture. One could therefore ask up to what point some of the insufficiencies in Della Volpe's thought would not be coterminous with the historical moment of its genesis. I am speaking of the insufficiencies already present in European Enlightenment thinkers and also, later on, in many Marxist conceptions. In Della Volpe they could be summarized in his own conception of modernism as *self-consciousness of the dialectic of historicity and system*, of the dynamic and the permanent. This by itself excludes the fragmentary and the non-integrable according to the unifying principles of reason, of the logos. It excludes all that appears as a dispersive force for, or escape point from, a political and theoretical design aimed at unifying homogeneously the human

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[trans. by Giuseppe Di Scipio]

**Language as Work and Trade:  
A Semiotic Homology for  
Linguistics and Economics**  
By Ferruccio Rossi-Landi  
South Hadley, MS: Bergin and  
Garvey, 1983

After Marx and Engels outlined the four ontological characteristics of the relations of production in *The German Ideology*, they inadvertently fell upon a consideration which has been held up as a paradigm of contemporary thinking by philosophers and linguists alike, namely, that the material body of consciousness is language. Their insight was apt. They were trying to debunk the hegemony of the philosophy of consciousness that had reigned so eloquently in German thought since the *Aufklärung*. Alas, they were never able to deliver on this insight. Marx, whose idea this most probably was, was preoccupied with other things like getting beyond ideology and turning to the *real* foundation of things through the study of the system of Capitalism. Even if the book were published in 1846, one might surmise that this insight concerning language would not have been observed given the minimal development of the linguistics of the time. Certainly, Marx never took the idea up again. One doubts he could have developed the idea given the state of the art at that time. This, of course, does not take away from the brilliance of the insight even though it occupies a mere paragraph in a massive corpus. Certainly, for those who study contemporary German philosophy it must be classified as precursor of those current attempts to move from a philosophy of consciousness to a philosophy of language.

If Marx could have developed this insight taking advantage of the advances in both contemporary linguistics and analytic philosophy, what

would be the result? Of course, the question is speculative, but not entirely without merit. Ferruccio Rossi-Landi in *Language as Work and Trade* has made just such an attempt. His task is to construct a homology between language and material production. The argument centers on the assumption that a linguistic artifact can be understood to be analogous to a material artifact. The schema constructed by Rossi-Landi is a multileveled one which organizes this homology beginning with the most simple, like the comparison between phonemic production and simple acts of labor. On the linguistic side one moves to ever higher levels of complexity from phonemes, to words, to sentences, to interconnected sentences, to syllogisms and arguments, to speeches and books. On the material side one moves from simple acts of labor to the production of simple instruments, to more complex instruments, to the production of composite tools, to machines, to the production of unique unrepeatable prototypes, etc. The argument does not attempt to claim that material and linguistic production are identical. The relationship is a homologous one.

This argument, the central one of the book, has its merits. A materialist explanation of the origins of production can no longer be sustained without the complementary insights of the twentieth-century revolution in both linguistics and linguistic philosophy. Rossi-Landi's argument makes this assumption. The specific merit of the argument is to show precisely how a theory of language can be associated with a materialist theory of production. The only problem with the argument is that it does not go far enough. In order to make this point clear it is necessary to turn to the self-reflexive hypothesis of the critical philosophy of the enlightenment and post-enlightenment period of which Karl Marx was a part. Working out of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Marx recognized that labor played a

self-reflexive role in an epistemological sense. Knowledge of both self and other was materialized, as it were, through social labor. Hence, Marx could argue that capitalistic control of the labor process, with its attendant domination of the labor force, would result in a false-consciousness given the self-reflexive function of labor. We know now that Marx's reflections were essentially restricted (aside from the famous exception mentioned at the outset of this essay) to a philosophy of self-consciousness. The object which is the product of labor cannot be epistemologically reappropriated by a subject without linguistic symbolization of that object. Therefore, in order to revise the Marxian model of production it would be necessary to posit language as the embodiment of, and not as homologous to, labor. Marx himself was prejudiced by the basic assumption of political economy which had dominated that discipline since the writings of Adam Smith, namely, that labor alone was that which could be used as a scientific principle for measuring economic and other values. From the point of view of the contemporary understanding of language, the model was too narrow.

The case for the homology between material and linguistic production argues that there is a fundamental relationship between the two. Indeed, this is true. But the relationship has to be more fundamental than that claimed by Rossi-Landi. Material reproduction cannot exist independently at any level. First it is necessary to rethink the basic relationship between labor and language at the epistemological level. However, if this is done it will be necessary to give up the argument for a homology because material reproduction and linguistic production could never appear as two independent entities.

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