

Reactivating the Social Body in Insurrectionary Times: A Dialogue with Franco 'Bifo' Berardi

By David Hugill and Elise Thorburn

Abstract

The Italian theorist Franco "Bifo" Berardi has spent a lifetime participating in revolutionary movements and thinking through their complexities. He is best known in the English-speaking world for his association with the Italian autonomist movement Operaismo ("workerism") and its prominent attempts to transform communist politics by resituating the "needs, desires, and organizational autonomies" of workers at the foundation of political praxis (Genosko and Thoburn 2011: 3). This text assembles excerpts from three interviews we conducted with Berardi over the course of the insurrectionary year 2011. Each of our conversations coincided with notable developments in last year's mobilizations and our interviewee's enthusiasm about those events is evident at certain points in the transcript. Yet while Berardi is generally optimistic about the revolts and the "reactivation of the social body" that they seem to imply, he reminds us that protest alone will not be enough to win the genuine kinds of autonomy that he suggests are necessary. He argues that dogmas of growth, competition and rent have so colonized every sphere of "human knowledge" that they have begun to threaten the very survival of what he calls "social civilization." The hegemonic grip of this "epistemological dictatorship" has altered our capacity to feel empathy towards one another, severing fundamental bonds of inter-personal connection. Yet in spite of this dark diagnosis, Berardi is not a doomsayer and he always leaves open the possibility of transformation and escape. He counsels that our best shot at deliverance lies in the development of new strategies of withdrawal, refusal, sabotage, and the negotiation of new "lines of flight" from the late-capitalist forms of domination.

Keywords: crisis; precariousness; Italian autonomism; capitalism; revolution; the occupy movement; the "Arab Spring"; neoliberal education; universities; debt

Introduction

The Italian theorist Franco "Bifo" Berardi has spent a lifetime participating in revolutionary movements and thinking through their complexities. He

is perhaps best known in the English-speaking world for his association with the Italian *Operaista* (“workerist”) movement – known colloquially as “Autonomism” or “Autonomist Marxism” – and its prominent attempts to transform communist politics by re-centering the “needs, desires, and organizational autonomies” of workers as the foundation of political praxis (Genosko and Thoburn 2011). The Autonomist tradition is primarily concerned with the *autonomy* of human subjects: it is a Marxism that insists on the primacy of laborers as active agents. Thus where Western Marxisms have tended to focus on the dominant logic of capital itself, Autonomists have sought to affirm the power of workers first, understanding transformations in the capitalist mode of production primarily as *responses* to class struggle (Dyer-Witheford 2004); the political history of capital, in other words, can be read as a “history of successive attempts of the capitalist class to emancipate itself from the working class” (Tronti 1979 quoted in Trott 2007). This inversion of the dialectical relationship between labor and capital (sometimes called the “Copernican Turn”) is thus often considered the hallmark of Autonomist theory (Moulier 1989).

What follows are excerpts of three interviews that we conducted with Bifo over the course of the insurrectionary year 2011. Each of our conversations coincided with notable developments in last year’s mobilizations and our interviewee’s enthusiasm about those events is evident at certain points in the transcript. Our first encounter was at an *Edufactory* meeting in Paris at which a range of groups had come together to build a common front against the neoliberalization of universities in Europe and around the world. The conference was held just weeks after the ouster of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and the proceedings were routinely interrupted by live updates from the ongoing revolution in Egypt. Indeed, news of the emergent ‘Arab Spring’ coupled with the energy of attendees from ongoing student mobilizations in Britain, Italy, Chile and elsewhere, animated the conference with a palpable sense that a new cycle of struggle was once again upon us. Our follow-up conversations with Bifo – both held remotely – were animated by a similar backdrop of upheaval as that revolutionary spring bled into an equally oppositional summer and then gave to an occupied fall. Yet while our interviewee remains generally optimistic about the events of 2011 and the “reactivation of the social body” that they seem to imply, he is also quick to remind us that protest alone will not be enough to win the genuine kinds of autonomy that he suggests are vitally necessary. As we shall see, Bifo’s primary concern is with the ways in which particular dogmas of growth, competition and rent have colonized the spheres of “human knowledge.” He argues that the persistence of these “mental cages” threatens the very survival of “social civilization” and remains critical about the capacity of protest to interrupt their pervasiveness. There are tactical implications to these observations and Bifo – both in the text below and elsewhere – asks tough questions about

whether marches and occupations are effective strategies for targeting contemporary arrangements of domination. Unlike the geographer Eric Swyngedouw (2011), who insists that the seizure of urban space continues to be at the heart of “emancipatory geo-political trajectories,” Bifo points to the limits of too enthusiastic an embrace of space-based urban struggle. His point is not to deny the importance of marches and occupations but to suggest that a more formidable foe resides in the deterritorialized orbit of software and algorithms, financial flows and behavioral automatisms. Indeed, he argues that the hegemonic grip of this “epistemological dictatorship” has altered our capacity to feel empathy towards one another, severing fundamental bonds of inter-personal connection. As he puts it elsewhere:

We have lost the pleasure of being together. Thirty years of precariousness and competition have destroyed social solidarity. Media virtualization has destroyed empathy among bodies, the pleasure of touching each other, and the pleasure of living in urban spaces. We have lost the pleasure of love, because too much time is devoted to work and virtual exchange (Berardi and Lovnik 2011).

Yet Bifo is not a doomsayer, in spite of this dark diagnosis, and he always leaves open the possibility of transformation and escape. He counsels that our best shot at deliverance lies in the development of new strategies of withdrawal, refusal, sabotage, and the negotiation of new “lines of flight” from late-capitalist forms of domination. There are good reasons to be optimistic as we reflect on the flourishing of this new “spring” of resistance but as Mike Davis (2011: 5) warns us “spring is the shortest of seasons.” Bifo’s observations are critical reminders that the hardest work will come as we try to sustain, transform and hone the insurrectionary energies of 2011. We hope this dialogue contributes to that process in some modest way.

Interview

Q: We’d like to begin by asking about the emphasis that you and others have placed on the role of financial capitalism in undermining what you call “social civilization.” You’ve suggested, among other things, that it is a deterritorializing form of predation because its violence is primarily conducted through a virtual circuitry. With this in mind, we’d like to ask a tactical question: if the architecture of contemporary domination is less and less linked to the control of physical spaces— if its more virtual and algorithmic than material and locatable – then where can that domination be meaningfully challenged?

A: In my view, imagination is the central field of social transformation in the age of semicapital. Capitalist domination is sustained by the persistence

of mental cages that are structured by the dogmas of growth, competition and rent. The epistemological dictatorship of this model – its grip on the different spheres of human knowledge – is the very ground of power. So the task of transformation requires us to imagine and make sensible a different concatenation of social forms, knowledge, and technology. Of course, imagination will never be enough on its own. We need to build forms of social solidarity that are capable of re-activating the social body after the long period of its isolation and subjugation to competitive aggressiveness. Solidarity – in contrast to this aggressiveness – is based on empathy, on the bodily perception of the presence of the other.

This word, solidarity, is a crucial word in the language of our movements but it needs to be better understood. What does solidarity mean, exactly? In general, we use the word in an ethical or political sense but this does not allow us to grasp its inner meaning. Solidarity, in my view, has to do with psychic and emotional relationships between living bodies. When we see that solidarity has broken down in our daily lives, the form that it takes is usually not political. Rather, it is an experience of dis-junction, a breaking down of empathetic bonds between living beings. The virtualization of communication, the precarization of work, and a range of other contemporary phenomena, have disconnected our capacity to feel empathy towards each other. In my opinion, this is the main problem of our time. Building and sustaining solidarity has to be much more than a political project. It is about reactivating the sentience of the social body much more than it is about political organization. Do you see what I mean? Ultimately, what we have is a problem of therapy, which, in my parlance, does not imply a process of re-connecting, or reducing language, behavior, or feelings to established norms. For me, therapy implies a process of re-activating empathy between living organisms. This empathy is the foundation of the solidarity we need today.

Q: In your view, has the wave of revolts and occupations that have unfolded over the past year or so, initiated this therapeutic process, this process of reactivating interpersonal empathy in the face of particular forms of domination?

A: I am still trying to understand what happened in 2011 but I do think the uprisings can be seen as a challenge to the dis-empathetic pathologies that are crossing the social skin and social soul and as the reactivation of the social body. They can be seen, in other words, as therapy for a psychopathology, as a process of healing.

For too long the dictatorship of financial capitalism has compressed the social body and the cynicism of the ruling class has become increasingly repugnant to many. This is why we should not be surprised that the uprisings have sometimes taken the form of violent explosions and will continue to do so. Of course, violence is itself a pathological demonstration

of impotence and there is little tactical justification for a violent anti-capitalist movement today. Nevertheless, we will continue to witness massive explosions of precarious rage and violence, like the ones that were unleashed in Tottenham, Peckham and elsewhere in the UK in August and in Rome in October. Future uprisings will frequently give way to the psychopathology of violence and this shouldn't surprise us. Neither should we condemn such acts as criminal. But in terms of the therapeutic meaning of the uprisings in general, I don't think it is simply a matter of political negotiation, of struggle, denunciation and demonstration. Rather, the main problem that is addressed by the uprisings – from Egypt to the occupation movement but also the violent riots in London and many other cities in Europe – is the reactivation of the link between human bodies, which is also a reactivation of a relationship to the city, to land, to territory.

Q: If imagination is the critical site of struggle, as you've suggested, then has it become less important for oppositional groups to fight battles in actual physical space? Has holding city squares or disturbing the ordered functioning of various financial districts become obsolete or merely symbolic tactical approach or can it still be productively disruptive?

A: I don't think that we will be able to win a fight against financial capitalism by demonstrating in the street. Destroying banks isn't useful if we are seeking emancipation from financial dictatorship. Financial power does not exist in the banks; it is embedded in software, in the technolinguistic automatisms that govern daily life and the psychic automatisms of consumerism, competition and fear. Nevertheless we are in the midst of a process – a movement – that will deploy itself over the course of the next decade, maybe longer, and we have to start from where we are and what we know. What we have today is the memory of past forms that our movements have taken, including occupations, strikes and demonstrations, both peaceful and violent. All of these are part of the legacy of 20th century social movements. Recently, we have tried to resurrect some of these old forms of struggle – these old forms of expression – but this hasn't worked particularly well. Established forms of peaceful demonstration have absolutely no possibility of changing the politics of financial capitalism. They don't work when democracy is dead - and it is totally dead, the European experience is demonstrating that clearly. But on the other hand, violent riots or bank bombings are also useless because they don't challenge the sites of real power. Real power is in the cybersphere, in the algorithms of financial control, in the quantitative analyses that undergird trading, and so on.

We continue to use old forms of action but we will have to begin to *imagine* new forms that are capable of actually struggling against financial dictatorship. In my opinion, the first task – which we have begun to experience over the last year – is the reactivation of the social body that I

have already described. But as I have said, this will not be enough. We will also have to begin to learn to create new forms of autonomy from financial control and so on. For instance, in Italy we have been talking increasingly of “insolvency.” Of course, insolvency means the inability to pay a debt but we don’t think of it strictly in monetary terms. There is also a symbolic debt that is always implied in power relationships. *Imagination* might mean the ability to create the possibility of insolvency – to create the right to be insolvent, the right not to pay a debt – at a semiotic and a symbolic level. We need to *imagine* forms of social relationships that escape monetary exchange or invent new forms of exchange, like time banks, new forms of currency, community currency and so on. Do you see what I am trying to say? The process of imagination begins with the reactivation of the social body but next this body has to create new levels of social interaction. Escaping financial dictatorship, in other words, means imagining new forms of social exchange. I don’t know what form emancipation will take in the coming years. I can only propose this little methodological starting point from what we already know.

Q: We want to build on this discussion about the “reactivation of the social body” by asking you a question about alliances and movement building. It’s our view that the ways that we talk about questions of “class” have been profoundly diminished in North American popular discourses. The geographer Neil Smith recently suggested that it has gotten so bad in the United States that there are now really only three classes that are acknowledged in public debate: millionaires, homeless people and the middle class (Hugill and Smith 2011: 88). In this context, we are extremely interested in your commitment to understanding “precariousness” as a central dimension of the contemporary. Do you see precariousness as a category that can be meaningfully mobilized as a basis for coming together and identifying with each other? In other words, do you think the idea of precariousness itself is substantial enough to form the basis of a new class politics?

A: Precariousness is not a marginal feature of contemporary labor relations. It is the general character of work in the age of globalization. We shouldn’t abandon class categories but they need to be redefined in every sense. The working and capitalist classes have changed dramatically since the dawn of industrial capitalism. The deterritorialization of property and work is the general trend that has led to widespread precarization. The old bourgeoisie was a territorialized class, linked to the physical property of factories, built environments and material assets. They were intimately connected to particular territories and territorial communities, which were the markets for what they produced. Today’s predatory financial class has no territorial affinity, no interest in the future of particular communities. The accumulation of capital is no longer based on the physical properties or the growth of physical quantities of goods but on the abstraction of digital and financial signs. Labor has been similarly detached from territory and

community. Workers no longer meet in the physical space of the factory and if they do it is usually provisional, temporary, precarious. This is why I think that precariousness has become the general condition of labor in addition to the general condition of social existence and self-perception. At its core, precariousness means the fragmentation of the work force. People no longer meet in the same place and social time has become fragmented, fractalized. The recent wave of movements are a way to re-connect some of these fragments that might otherwise have no way, no time, no space to meet. This, essentially, is what an occupation is. I use the language of reactivating the social body but one could also call it an attempt to bring together that which has been broken apart by the generalization of precariousness. I see the Occupy movement, for example, as an attempt at recomposing the broken body of the precarious community.

Q: Elsewhere, you've spoken about how the generalization of precariousness and crisis has made space for new alliances to be formed, including between academic or university workers, so-called "cognitive" laborers, and other kinds of workers. Would you expand on this a little?

A: I am interested in looking at this problem through questions of subjective consciousness, the ways in which crisis has been perceived by different social subjectivities. Over the last decade our consciousness of the centrality of "cognitive labor" has been increasing. For example, in just the last two years in Italy the university has become one of the central foci of struggle. The situation is becoming so dramatic everywhere that new forms of alliance and connection between the social crisis and the problem of the university are being made and this is new. For example, in Italy, in recent months, a new organization has been created called United Against the Crisis – it is a meeting point for metalworkers and students and researchers. In some sense, it is reminiscent of the 1960s or 1970s but it is also absolutely new in other ways.

Q: How successful have these experiments in alliance building been?

A: Well, in January 2011 there was a general strike of the metalworkers all over Italy and it was very successful. In my region around 90% of workers were striking in their factories. And what was interesting was that the squares were full not only of metal workers but also of students. Just after that, in Porto Marghera (an important city for working class memory because everybody associates it with autonomous workers movements of the 1960s and 1970s) the FIOM (*Federazione Impiegati Operai Metallurgici*), the main union of metal workers, and the so-called *disubbidientes*, which is a national organization of students and precarious workers, decided to hold a common meeting that roughly 2000 people attended. It was the first time in 40 years that unionists and students met together to decide common actions against the crisis. I want to stress the novelty of this. The

government and leading classes had been saying for so long that nothing was happening but now it has become completely evident that we have a massive awakening of social cultures.

Q: There aren't many precedents for these kinds of alliances between students and university workers with other kinds of workers in contemporary North American contexts. So, on this side of the ocean, we don't have much of a blueprint to begin building them today. Can you tell us how these connections were forged and sustained?

A: In Italy there is a long legacy of students and workers "united in the struggle." In fact, this was one of the main slogans in the 1960s and 1970s. And it wasn't just rhetoric either. It was really something deep. Of course, this was thirty or forty years ago and in the meantime many things have happened. But over the last five or six years, the precarization of workers has created a new common ground between workers and students. Students are precarious workers in most instances and factory workers know that precariousness for students is also a problem for them, a blackmail to be used against them. Additionally, the public discourse and the consciousness of generalized precariousness has been growing dramatically over the last few years and this has had a significant impact. I think that the problem of precariousness is felt differently in Italy and Europe than it is in North America. Precariousness is something that is inherent to labor relations in North America. Of course, I can't give suggestions to North American activists but I think that working to understand the new character, the new cruciality, that precariousness has taken on in the present time is of critical importance. Once upon a time, precariousness was a marginal space of labor in general but today it is fixed labor that has become marginal. And so, we need to do things like change the perception of what a student is. Most students are precarious workers, first and foremost.

Q: Can you elaborate? In what sense is a student a precarious worker?

A: First of all because students are increasingly learning in small parcels, small fragments, small fractals of knowledge, and they are becoming more and more accustomed to think of their knowledge not as knowledge but as intellectual availability to exploitation. In North American forms of education this is already well established, it is nothing new. It is new in much of Europe and it has begun to provoke some reactions. But it is also a fact of a networked and globalized world. What does precariousness mean today? What is the relationship between precariousness and globalization? It means that you can buy a fragment of labor in Bangkok, a fragment in Buenos Aires, and a fragment in Milan and that these three fragments become the same product from the point of view of capital. Knowledge is headed the same way. You no longer need – from the point of view of capital – to know in the humanistic sense, the meaning, the finality, the intimate

contradictions of knowledge, you just need to know how particular parcels of knowledge can be made functional. There is something new and something old in this. Herbert Marcuse's (1964) *One Dimensional Man* already identified this problem of the functionalization of knowledge but in his time it was only a kind of prediction about how capitalism would be transformed. Today, this functional consideration is the dominant form of our relationship to knowledge. So, we should question people about what is happening to our knowledge. Are we really learning things, knowing things? Or are we simply learning how to become part of the productive machine? Additionally, I think we need to ask people, especially young people, about their suffering in the relationship with knowledge, with communication and so on. I think that the problem of psychic suffering is of central importance our time. Problems of depression, panic, massive suicide, are very real. Do you know that suicide has become the main cause of death among people between 18-25 years old? Suicide is becoming a political weapon. I'm not only thinking of Columbine or of Mohamed Bouazizi, the man who killed himself and started the Tunisian revolution. Suicide has something to do with knowledge. When your knowledge is becoming more and more something that does not belong to you, this is a problem of personal identity, of psychic identity.

Q: Do you see a relationship between this psychic suffering and the virtualization of communication that has been associated with new kinds of technology?

A: This is a tricky and difficult question to answer because I see a profound danger in reactionary technophobia. I am absolutely not a technophobe but I do want to question the ambiguity of new technologies. It is evident that new technological forms are in some sense tools of empowerment for social movements – we see what has happened in Egypt and Tunisia, for example. This is clear enough but it is only part of the question. The other part concerns the relationship between bodily perception of society, affective perception of society, and work. Thirty-five years ago I read a book called *The Show and Tell Machine*, by an American anthropologist called Rose Goldsen. I read this book in 1978 or 1979 but I was so struck by one sentence that I can still repeat it, “we are breeding the first generation that will learn more words from a machine than from mothers.” I remember that Freud said that the main place of affective creation – of the creation of personal affection – is language and the relationship between language learning and bodily affection. The dark side of new technology is this distance from the body of the mother, and by the “body of the mother” I mean the body in general, the ability to perceive oneself linguistically in relationship to the body. This is being lost. You know, psychiatrists say that twenty years ago the word panic meant nothing, but today panic is a new symptomology. Today, it effects 15% of the young people, especially women. And this is absolutely new. So why is this happening? It is because panic is a problem

of the relationship between the body and information, the acceleration of information in conditions of competitiveness. This is pathogenic. There are new forms of pathology that are emerging from the acceleration of the technological rhythm of information and the separation of the body from the social process. Our social processes are less and less bodily processes and more and more informational processes. I like the Internet very much and particularly the possibilities that it creates. I don't want to renounce it but I see that the new technologies have this dark side but I don't have a solution. There are key problems here in terms of subjectivation, political understanding and so on, and we should work on this ambiguity, this double bind. I think we need to be cautious about the triumphalism that associates new technologies with democratic possibilities etcetera. Yes there are these possibilities but new technology does not mean only that.

Q: Do you invest any hope in the capacity of new technologies - particularly virtual communication technologies - to accomplish the reactivation of the social that you mentioned at the outset of this interview?

A: Of course I do. I am not a reactionary, nor am I a nostalgic person who wants to go back to a time of low-tech communication. The technological struggle is part of a living body of society but the problem is that during the last twenty years new technologies have also cancelled or obscured the possibility of a bodily relationship between social beings. In one sense, social networking and social media technologies have been useful in calling bodies to the street but this dynamic of virtual embodiment has to be reactivated from the point of view of the body, of eroticism, of social relationships. I don't want to suggest that we should forget about new technology, but rather that we have to inscribe these technologies within a new bodily relationship to each other in physical space, not only in virtual space.

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