

Capitalism After the Future: An Interview with Franco “Bifo” Berardi

Franco “Bifo” Berardi is one of the most influential theorists of post-autonomism. From his early involvement in Italian Autonomia to his more recent writings on semio-capitalism, Bifo has sought to understand the post-Fordist transformation of labor and subjectivity, and what it means for emancipatory politics. In this conversation with Hasan Mısırlıoğlu, he reflects on the fragmentation of labor in contemporary capitalism, the endurance of colonial violence, and the loss of the future.

The main concern of your work has been the post-industrial transformation of capitalism. How has labor changed in this process? More specifically, how has this transformation reshaped class struggle today?

Two concepts have been important to me for a definition of the new social landscape in the new century: semio-capitalism and cognitariat. These concepts are linked together. The meaning of the word semio-capital is clearly linked with the transformation of the process of valorization after the electronic, connective transformation of the production process. Semiology is the science that studies signs, the relation between a signifier and a signified. I started using his expression that I take from Umberto Eco, the semiological school of Italy, and I tried to link the semiological field with the analysis of contemporary capitalism. It implies the idea that signs are more and more the product that circulates in the infosphere, which is the market today. The contemporary market is essentially a market of information. The word information is not limited to the media. All of the production and consumption in contemporary capitalism is mediated by information. So semio-capitalism is a way to redefine the process of production.

Some theorists like Yann Moulier-Boutang and Maurizio Lazzarato have used the expression ‘cognitive capitalism’. I think that we are in the same field, but I prefer the expression ‘semio’ because it is more clearly referring to the immaterialization of production. At the same time, I have tried to find a way of defining social subjectivity in the present form of capitalism. The expression *cognitariat* evidently refers to the intersection of cognition and the proletariat, the proletariat of knowledge and of information production.

The problem is that these concepts have been elaborated by other thinkers and myself in the period, let's say, of the emergence of the ‘new economy’ based on the network in the 90s and the first decade of the new century. In that period, there was the possibility of imagining that

a new subjectivity could emerge, a new subjectivity based on the new forms of labor and able to fight against exploitation in the new economy. But today, we are already beyond this age. My theoretical and political expectation at the time was that the new labor force could start the process of self-organization and could stop the process of totalitarian deployment of semio-capitalism. I was wrong. I mean, it is not a problem of being right or wrong. It is a problem of the redefinition of the role of subjectivity. That is the point. What I expected was the continuation of the concept and of the practice of class struggle in the new configuration of capitalism. Yet, it is not happening. Why?

The reasons pertain essentially to the new forms of subjectivity. Industrial workers developed the kind of revolutionary subjectivity that we know through the workers movement, the unions, social solidarity, social struggles and so on, because they were living together in the same place and the condition of their activity was a condition of material, economic, social, territorial vicinity, and of equality of the conditions of work, of salary, of expectation, of culture. The process of proletarian subjectivation was possible in those conditions.

What is the nature of the labor force today? The physical, material separation, isolation, the absence of the body of the other worker, and the permanent condition of competition, the precariousness of labor, mean a radical transformation in the conditions of subjectivity. Precarious workers never become friends. They live in a permanent condition of competition. Every day, they can lose their job and their salary. Every day, they have to fight for their jobs and their salaries. This is why semio-capitalism seems to escape the possibility of class struggle. What is the consequence of it? You can see it in the new condition of labor. Slavery is coming back. Slave labor is everywhere, in the West and in the South of the world.

We are not dealing with a new class able to organize itself; we are dealing with an ocean of fragments of precarious labor. How can this ocean become solidarity? How can we start the process of autonomous subjectivation? I do not know. Probably the new age of Donald Trump is marking a passage toward an age in which no possibility of social organization is given. And we must face reality. We should not escape into moralistic imagination. No way. No way of escaping.

Theory has put significant emphasis on the reproduction of capitalism through increasingly decentralized and automated methods of control, marking the 'comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom' described by Marcuse as the standard of late capitalism. But today, for a generation of young people, the present has come to be defined exclusively by violence, genocide, and exploitation. Capitalism has once again reaffirmed the reterritorializing and repressive logic at its core. How should we think of the decentralization of power and the automation of social processes in light of the genocide in Palestine? Are we to change our understanding of the relation between automation and violence?

First, let's try to understand the age that opens now, the Trump age, from the point of view of genocide. Genocide is a very strong word that once upon a time was used to define the

extermination of entire populations. Now we use this expression to define what is happening in Gaza. But there is a meaning of the Israeli genocide that goes beyond the limits of that area of Palestine and of the Middle East. This meaning is the return of colonialism. Colonialism has entered a totally new phase. Colonialism was the territorial occupation of a territory by a colonialist country. Now colonialism takes a different form because it is mediated by the technologies of deterritorialization, the connective technologies. But at the same time, capitalism is facing territorial problems of relation with the existing populations of the world, particularly those populations that do not belong to the white race.

When I use the expression 'white race', which is disgusting and scientifically unfounded, I use it as a mythological, ideological expression. The 'white race' does not exist, but white suprematism does. White suprematism is the idea, and not only the idea, but the reality of a privilege that the Northern population, the Western population, wants to preserve. But simultaneously, the Western population is growing old; it is slowly disappearing, and they know it. The reaction to this is totally rational, a reaction of self-preservation of an agonizing organism, and simultaneously, the attempt to eliminate the migrant population that threatens it.

So when we say genocide, we refer to Gaza, but at the same time, we must refer to the killing of thousands, of hundreds of thousands of people, all along the border between the North and the South of the world, from the Mexican border to the Mediterranean, to the Eastern border between Europe and Asia. Turkey, which is clearly a place of containment of migrant labor: genocide is going on at this border. A genocide is also happening inside Western society because the destruction of the public health system is a process of the extermination of the poor inside the fortress, the White Fortress itself.

I see the Trump moment as a moment of senile dementia, of craziness, of psychosis, but at the same time as a moment of cruel preservation of the privilege of a small minority of the human population, a sort of omnipresent genocide. At the same time, another totally different process is going on, a process of automation of every aspect of planetary life. This automation may be identified with the creation of a sort of network of infrastructures.

The real place of power today is no longer the national state. The real place of power resides in the global infrastructures that make possible the continuation of the economy. The main infrastructure, of course, is the internet, but a global infrastructure is also the energetic infrastructure, the financial infrastructure, the systems that make possible the reproduction of social life. So you can see today the transformation of the state into a sort of system of interaction between global infrastructures that allow the reproduction of the economy. These infrastructures are linking, are interconnecting up to a point that a sort of general automaton, a global automaton, is taking the place that once upon a time was the place of the state. The state is replaced by a sort of system of automatisms, techno-linguistic automatisms that make possible the reproduction of the economy. So on one side, you have chaos, the chaos of the global war, the chaos of the expanding genocide, the chaos of inter-imperialist conflicts. But on the other side, you have the creation of a sort of system of interconnected automatisms.

Note that the two processes are not separate. Paradoxically, the more chaotic social life is, the more automated has to be the management, the global management of the reproduction cycle.

Chaos and the automaton. This is the subject that I am trying to theorize. Frankly speaking, I do not understand what is the place of theory nowadays. I mean, once upon a time, I thought that theory could help people to self-organize and get free from capitalism. Now, I think that theory has lost the ability to produce practical effects. So I am looking for a new space for theory.

In your recent writings, you have focused on what you call the 'impotence of political will' and its connection to the loss of the future. This has led you to question the possibilities for political action and hope after the future, when the future can no longer be thought of as a teleological certainty. How has political potency become paralyzed?

First, the concept of the future is in question. The future is not only a chronological concept, but also an anthropological, cultural, and psychological concept. What the future was for modern society is well explained by the Futurist movement. A hundred years ago, in Italy, in Russia, and everywhere, the idea of Futurism was the idea of expansion: economic, territorial, and colonial expansion and improvement. The next generation will live better, will have a better salary, etc. Futurism was the expression of a young society. If you compare the demography of Italy at the beginning of the 20th century and the demography of Italian society today, you understand that in the past century, the Italian population was young. Old people were a small minority with no importance at the social level.

Today, the contrary is true. The Italian population is a population of old people. What is the future for me? Nothing. What is the future for you? Everything. You know that your future is a long process of discovery, novelty, and experiment. For me, the future is extinction. The problem is that the population of the world is going to grow older and older. This is why the future means less and less. Young people exist, but they are a shrinking population, and they live in a condition in which the possibility of expansion is over, not only because of the growing old, but also because of the environmental collapse. Expansion today means more climatic catastrophes. So expansion has grown impossible. In fact, the racists of Europe, of the North of the world, a hundred years ago, were planning the colonization of Africa. We go there, we conquer, we submit. Now it is the contrary. We are fearing the invasion of migrants who will come here. You see, that is why the demographic trend is not only a demographic problem, it is first of all a cultural problem, a psychological problem.

I think that Western culture is unable to deal with senescence, with senility. And these inabilities link with the very core of Western culture, which is based on the idea of the future, of expansion, of growth. Expansion is impossible. Growth means catastrophe. So what? The reaction is a demented reaction, the expression an inability to deal with reality, because reality has grown unacceptable. War, aggressiveness, fascism. This is the psychological reaction and the political reaction to this kind of dementia. Impotence is a word that well

defines the senile condition. Impotence is a political category, but first of all, it is a sexual definition of the senile condition. The inability to be what you have internalized. And political impotence means that politics has grown unable to control, to govern the global processes that are more and more automated and more and more chaotic. This is the meaning of impotence.

This interview was conducted in January 2025.

Hasan Mısırlıoğlu is a graduate student at the University of Amsterdam. In 2024, he published an article in Simulacrum titled 'From Fiction, Truth; from Truth, a Rupture,' presenting a speculative movement from the deadlocks of post-structuralist discourse to the radical politics of the Situationist International. His current research focuses on the concepts of universality and teleology in historical materialism, as well as the question of representation in Marxist aesthetics.