

An interview with the renowned Italian autonomist Marxist philosopher, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi. The discussion charts Berardi's entry into, and expulsion from, the Italian Communist Party in his teenage years and his introduction to the *operaismo* movement through Mario Tronti's classic text *Workers and Capital* (1966). As one of the founders of the pirate station 'Radio Alice' and the avant-garde magazine *A/traverso*, Berardi was heavily involved in the 1977 protests in Bologna, one of the major struggles of the Italian *operaismo* movement. Berardi also discusses his close friendship with Félix Guattari (including his role in getting Berardi out of prison in Paris) and the influence of Jean Baudrillard on his philosophical practice. Alongside these intellectual and political genealogies, we chat about the war in Ukraine, Israel's siege on Gaza, and the role psychoanalytic theory might play in understanding politics today. To finish, Berardi outlines his new book *Quit Everything* (2024) and how its central ideas speak to younger people who now think of themselves as 'the last generation'.

INTERVIEW

Futurism without a Future

FRANCO 'BIFO' BERARDI

INTERVIEW BY NEIL VALLELLY

Neil Vallelly (NV) ¹

In my initial email to you I mentioned that we had interviewed Camila Vergara for the previous issue of *Counterfutures* and you said that you have a special interest in Latin America, especially the Chilean situation. Can you explain why?²

Franco 'Bifo' Berardi (FB)

I have many friends in Latin America, particularly in Argentina, but also in Chile, so I have followed the Chilean protests since their beginning in 2019. I found the Chilean riots had similar aesthetics to Bologna 1977. The style of the documents, the graffiti, the street protests were very similar, and the reference to depression, to psychopathologies, was like the Bologna uprising. So I followed the events in Chile after the insurrection and then, little by little, I started to see that the movement went in the wrong direction. But this was probably inevitable. The initial victory of the constitutional referendum and the establishment of the constitutional assembly was followed by a drawn-out process with lots of

1 Many thanks to Jordan Dougherty for helping transcribe these interviews and to Niall Campbell for proofreading them.

2 Camila Vergara, 'Constitutional Transformation in Chile: Mapping the Horizon of Struggle', interview by Neil Vallelly, *Counterfutures* 14 (2023): 56–81.

discussion and a very long draft constitution that was impossible to read. Despite all the rhetoric of the left, it ended in defeat, which effectively marked the end of the movement.

But 2023 is also the year of France, and what is happening in France is also very important. First, workers were protesting in the streets for three months against reforms. Then, in the end, Macron wins and declares: “I don’t care that 70 per cent of French people are against the reform, I will go ahead with it”. Then came the protests in *les banlieues* against police brutality. What has struck me here is the separation between these two movements, between the workers and the migrants, which have become antagonistic movements. The worker protests—like *les gilets jaunes* movement—was a leftist movement, but we cannot deny that it was a white movement. What we saw was a white movement in the spring and a black movement in the summer with little interaction between them, and both ended in two separate defeats.

NV: What crossovers do you see with what is happening in France (and elsewhere) and what is happening in Italy?

FB: Of course there are crossovers. Recently, Marine Le Pen was in Italy, together with Matteo Salvini. They gave a speech in a place close to Milan saying that they will be a united front for the European elections. My perception is that we have to think in terms of a long-lasting hegemony that is developing. Of what? I don’t have a precise word to define it. Should I say fascism? Is fascism winning in Europe? Actually, if we look at the map, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Italy, now France, and Spain on the brink of the far-right. And so, what is happening? Well, I would say yes and no to the question of whether this is fascism? If I think of fascism from 100 years ago, I see a movement of young people or a movement of expansion, a movement of conquest. They went to colonise Africa, to civilise, and so on. Now it’s the contrary—it is a movement of old people. I know there are some young people involved, but young fascists are old, politically old. This is fascism without a futurism, and fascism without futurism is not

fascism; it's something gloomier. Fascism without futurism is more like nihilism. Yes, nihilism is the right word because the common feature of what is happening in the different countries of Europe is the fear of Africa. This is the common fact. I say Africa because Africa is a strong word for Europeans, but I also mean from Afghanistan to Iraq to Iran. And this fear provokes a sort of racist anxiety. Not ideological racism, psychological racism. It's not about politics is my point. If we think in terms of politics, we won't understand.

NV: It is interesting that you bring up nihilism and futurism here, which feature in various ways in your body of work. For me, your work has developed a new theory of alienation in the twenty-first century, an alienation that is different to those older forms of alienation that were, to think of them affectively, mostly to do with boredom. But the forms of alienation that exist today stem from an over-determination or over-production of affect. There's too much noise. Do you think that these new forms of alienation lend themselves towards a nihilistic, fascist project?

FB: When you use the word alienation, I follow you. I understand what you mean. But, at the same time, I think that the word is confusing. Philosophically speaking, it is a little bit confusing because that word was part of my formation as a thinker. I started in the sixties, as you know, and my first philosophical books were the young Karl Marx, Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, Jean-Paul Sartre, and those kind of thinkers, for whom the word alienation means something that is strongly linked to the condition of the industrial worker. This meaning has not disappeared of course, but now we are talking of something different in a sense. And so the word is philologically correct, if you want, because it refers to the condition of the mental loss of yourself, of mental inauthenticity. But now we are facing something new.

What you say can be labelled in a different way, because it is an effect of what Félix Guattari calls 'chaosmosis', of an acceleration of mental inputs, of mental activation. The hyper-stimulation of the collective mind

is something different from Marcuse's form of alienation, which is a kind of deadening or anaesthetisation. So we have analyse these two different kinds of alienation together, if you want to understand our activity, our work today, which is basically the same as it was 100 years ago, but in a much more intensive way. The pathological effects of the acceleration of this cycle of nervous stimulation, and, obviously, the present wave of aggressive fascism, is particularly linked to this newer form of alienation—it is essentially linked to a condition of too much, too much, too much, too much. We are less and less able to process these stimulations and, at the same time, we are old! This is an important point if you think of the European population. At the beginning of the past twentieth century, only ten per cent of the European population was over 60 years old. Now it is a third of the entire population. This demographic situation is creating a different perception of the acceleration of flows of information because we feel the decline but we don't have the cultural tools to understand them. In Europe, futurism is our culture, but we don't have a future.

NV: It's hard not think here of your book *After the Future*, which posits that the future is over, in the utopian sense of the future. But then in your recent work you develop the concept of 'futurability', which you describe as 'becoming other to which is already inscribed in the present'. What is the relationship between these ideas?

FB: I would say, future is expansion. If we link future and expansion, and the white culture that is based on it, then now the future is something different. What? What exactly is it?

NV: Is it extinction?

FB: Extinction?

NV: I'm thinking here of the ways in which expansion and growth have been so central to European epistemologies that perhaps we now must

understand the future through degrowth and extinction.

FB: Well, let's say that degrowth is a possible direction for the future, but we are not prepared for it. We are culturally unable to think in terms of degrowth. Also, the culture of left Marxism, of neo-*operaismo*, makes it very difficult, and probably impossible, to think of the reduction in material expectations. Such conclusions are why my post-*operaismo* friends sometimes label me as a pessimist, but I am absolutely not a pessimist. I am a happy person, but I don't give a damn about being sad.

NV: Let's talk a little bit of your relationship to *operaismo*. You've said in the past that your first introduction to *operaismo*, as a teenager, was through Mario Tronti's *Workers and Capital* (1966). Could you say a little bit about what that book did for you and how it spoke to the wider movement?

FB: I read that book when I was 16 years old, and it was crucial in my formation. I tried to understand what message was for me in the book. I was a young communist; my father was a communist. I entered the Communist Party when it was 14 years old and I was expelled from the Party when it was 17.

Why did Tronti push me to be an extremist? I think there are two reasons. One, his centring of the chronological relation between class struggle and capital development. This was, theoretically and methodologically speaking, a real revolution. He argues that social unrest and class struggle come first and then capitalist accumulation. In other words, capitalism responds to the movements of social life and not the other way around. Capitalism is stimulated to develop by the anxiety of social life. Two, Tronti introduced the idea that the real issue for revolution or social struggle is the possibility of laziness, of the refusal of work. That was another theoretical revolution for me.

These ideas fuelled an intolerance of communist dogmatism. The Italian Communist Party was not a Stalinist party. Well, yes and no. It was certainly more democratic than Russian Stalinism, but the methodological

foundations of the Italian Communist Party were the same methodological foundations of the Soviet Marxism. This was why Tronti was important for me, even though Tronti did not share our extremism. He stayed inside the Communist Party. All the Trontians left, but Tronti stayed in.

I actually think that Tronti fundamentally misunderstood the '68 movement. In a small book called *Noi Operaisti (We Workerists)*, he says that '68 was the renewal of the leading class of the bourgeoisie.³ This is an idea that belongs to many Italian leftists of that age, like Pier Paolo Pasolini, but it is a serious misunderstanding of what happened in that moment. I agree that '68 was a renewal of the bourgeoisie, but it has been many more things than that. Ever since, French political philosophy—I can also think of British Blairism—has been a redefinition of the '68 spirit in terms of an innovation of the capitalist.

NV: Alain Badiou also makes that point.

FB: Absolutely. You say it in your book.

NV: Yes, Badiou says the real winner of '68 was neoliberal capitalism.

FB: Yes, but you cannot understand '68, if you think only in those terms, because '68 was something different, especially in the relation between workers and students. But most of all, '68 was the first moment of the self-organisation of cognitive workers. I don't know if you remember a speech by Mario Savio in Berkeley in December 1964. Savio was a leader of the Berkeley student movement during the Vietnam War, at the beginning of New Left culture. In this speech, he says that his scientific, technical, humanistic knowledge is being used for war, for producing weapons, for killing people, for exploiting people. He says that he wants to take his body and throw it into the wheels of the machine. It's very beautiful and I've quoted it before. He understands the crucial point is not the bourgeoisie or

3 Mario Tronti, *Noi Operaisti* (Bologna: DeriveApprodi, 2009). For a translated extract from the book, see Mario Tronti, 'Our Operaismo', trans. Elanor Chiari, *New Left Review* 73 (2012): 188–139.

the working classes. The crucial point is the proletarianisation of cognitive work—the proliferation of intellectuals, of scientists.

I understand the '68 movement from this point of view, as a sudden understanding of something new. Marx, of course, used the expression “general intellect” and Gramsci talks about the intellectual. Okay, I like Gramsci, a little bit. But he did not see the crucial point. Of course, Gramsci is writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, but in the 1960s, it is clear that the real problem of the future is the direction of cognitive work. 1968 is the year when Stanley Kubrick makes *Space Odyssey*. In *Space Odyssey*, the main problem is who controls the brain of Hal 9000. The humans or the machine? In the end, the machine wins. '68 has been defeated because capitalism has been able to take over the machine. That's the point.

NV: The relationship between the human and machine is a theme through your work, and it is obvious that Gilles Deleuze and Guattari have had a strong influence on you, especially given your friendship with Guattari. But it seems to me that Jean Baudrillard is even more of an influence. Is that a correct assumption?

FB: I agree with you, even if it's difficult for me to say, because I was a friend with Guattari. In a sense, he saved my life in 1977. I will try to synthesize a very complicated story. In March of that year, there was an insurrection in Bologna and Rome. For three days, all the neighbourhood around my home in Bologna were occupied by students and young workers, and the police came with tanks to retake the centre of the city. The Communist Party, alongside the government, was the leading force of the repression of the students. I was forced to escape the city because I was considered one of the leaders, together with those at Radio Alice.⁴ I escaped to Paris in the

⁴ Radio Alice was a counter-cultural, pirate radio station in Bologna between 1973 and 1977. Berardi was one of the founding members. For more on Radio Alice and its role in the Bologna protests in 1977, see Damien Pollard, 'Radio Alice and Italy's Movement of 1977: Polyvocality, Sonority and Space', *Sound Studies* 7, no. 2 (2021): 151–172.

spring of 1977. When I got there, I met Guattari and we started spreading information about the 300 people that had been arrested in Bologna during the riots. The Italian police gave orders to the French police to arrest me, and I stayed in jail for two weeks. Guattari organised a protest against my arrest, drawing on all of his intellectual friends who were powerful in that that period. I was liberated thanks to him.

I was strongly linked with that group of intellectuals, and I shared the philosophy of Guattari. But in the following years I got in contact with Baudrillard; he was a friend too, but my milieu was Guattari's group, and he and Baudrillard were not friends at all. I don't know why, but it was not a philosophical fight. In that period, Paris was a very interesting place but it was also complicated. I felt closer to the dystopic feeling of Baudrillard than to the general optimism of the happy revolution of Guattari. Well, I was in-between, but little by little I discovered myself on the side of Baudrillard, but I could not say! I'm joking, of course, but it was difficult because revolutionary optimism was the politically dominant position of the movement at that time. Baudrillard was seen as too dystopic, associated with science fiction, bad feelings; he was not Spinozian enough.

But I think that Baudrillard was able to see into the future more than the others; he understood that the main problem was not the liberation of desire, but the excessive investment of psychic energy in consumption, and particularly information, of the capture of subjectivity by the flow of information, by the nervous stimulation. But still, I cannot choose. I see the polarity. I see that they are very polarised and are different. But I don't think that I am obliged to choose one or the other, because the Spinozian spirit, the happy spirit of Guattari has to be saved as a possibility. But at the same time, we have to be serious about what is happening now. You know, people like Antonio Negri are not serious. He is not serious, in my opinion. I mean the cultural experience of Negri and Michael Hardt is not serious. They refuse to speak about depression. Depression is crucial if you want to understand what is happening in this century. I am not advertising depression, but I also understand that if you don't speak about depression to people in their twenties now, then you speak of nothing.

NV: I see this with students, who are usually in their early twenties. There is no way of understanding their cultural existence without a theory of depression, or of psychopathology in general.

FB: Yes. My next book deals with this phenomenon. It came out in Italy in April 2023.⁵ The Italian title is *Disertate*. It is difficult to translate. It essentially means quit everything. Here, I tried to work on the concept of depression. I start from Mark Fisher, of course, who was a friend, and he was very good at explaining the depression of the past century.⁶ But now depression is a different thing. Now, depression is the starting point of a new movement, which is a movement of desertion. Depression can also be, from the psychological point, transformed into a conscious movement of withdrawal from the catastrophe of late modernity. This is my current point. I work on the concept of resignation, which in English has a double meaning. What does resign mean? Accept something, but also *re-sign*, leaving a different meaning to what you are obliged to accept—to re-signify. The ambiguous meaning of the word resignation is very interesting for me.

NV: I think the book that really drew me into your work was *The Uprising*, on poetry and finance, because you make the point that finance capital has transformed a relationship between accumulation and utility, and thus, the production of useful things is no longer needed, or just needed, to accumulate capital.

FB: What you say about usefulness is crucial; it is very important. What I take from your book is the emphasis on the problem of usefulness, which is at the centre of Marx. The problem for Marx was that usefulness is transformed into value, into exchange, into the accumulation of capital. But today, the main problem is finding a way back to usefulness, or going back to frugality; it can be translated into Franciscan terms if you want. The

5 Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Disertate* (Palermo: Timeo, 2023). An English translation under the title *Quit Everything* will be published by Repeater Books in August 2024.

6 See Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (London: Zero, 2014).

idea of frugality is very much in Marx; it is page one of *Das Kapital*.

NV: What is the future then?

FB: You mean, what's going to happen?

NV: I guess so.

FB: I wonder if we will see the end of this decade. We have entered into a psychotic cycle of suicidal war. I see it everywhere. The white race; I beg your pardon for using this horrible expression; it means nothing, because the white race does not exist. But the mythology of white supremacy does exist very much, and this mythology is not ready to disappear; it is leading us to a sort of senile dementia that prepares us for suicide. But this resignation of the white race is not exactly a suicide; it is a mass shooting, in the sense that I want to die so I start killing everybody in the street. The Ukrainian war is frightening because I don't see the way out. The way out is the end.

This is not a prediction, of course. This is just a perception. In 1919, after the First World War, Sándor Ferenczi, who was a close friend of Sigmund Freud and one of the founders of psychoanalysis, said that psychoanalysts have the conceptual tools to understand and cure an individual neurosis, but they don't possess the tools to understand and to deal with mass psychosis. Mass psychosis of the white mythological race—this is the shadow over the future. How can we escape it? That's the problem now.

Did you see the Christopher Nolan movie *Oppenheimer*?

NV: Yes, I did.

FB: At the end, when Oppenheimer meets Einstein, he says something like “we worried we would destroy the world. I believe we have.” Well, the German Jewish philosopher Günther Anders said that once we have invented the atom bomb, we have already destroyed the world because there

is no way out. That is now. And the creation of the atom bomb encapsulates the capture of cognitive work by capitalism, by the military machine of capitalism. The Manhattan Project is the proof of this subsumption, the subsumption of intellectual work to capitalist logic.

27 September 2023

NV: Thanks for agreeing to chat again, Franco. I wanted to follow up on a couple of things. One, to talk a bit more about your new book, but also to reflect on 7 October and the Israeli siege on Gaza, which, as we speak, is gathering terrifying dimensions.

FB: I have written a piece on Gaza called ‘The Epicentre’.⁷ What is happening is too horrible. I have no words for it, you know. I have some Jewish roots in my family, and I feel Jewish, culturally and psychologically. In this moment, Israel, in my opinion, cannot be identified as a Jewish son. It is a national state, Zionist of course, but Zionist does not mean Jewish. Nevertheless, we must face the psychological, the psychoanalytical genealogy of this monstrosity that is the national state of Israel. I try to do this in my piece.

NV: Perhaps, then, we can think a bit more about your upcoming book, which touches on such psychological and psychoanalytical developments.

FB: I started writing it at the beginning of the Ukrainian war. This war is close, not geographically, but historically. I started asking myself if I was in Kiev, in Kharkiv, what would I do? Would I fight together with the Ukrainian army? Let’s be frank, there is a strong Nazi imaginary in the Ukrainian army, with parts of these armies explicitly brandishing Nazi symbols, and so on. So, would I fight with them? Or would I accept Putin’s fascist invasion? Well, at one point, I received some messages from

7 Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, ‘The Epicentre’, Institute of Network Cultures (Blog), 18 November, 2023.

a friend of mine, a Ukrainian artist who defines himself as a socialist and anarchist and who was attacked by a fascist group of Ukrainians some years ago. He went abroad and broke his relationship with Ukraine. But when Putin launched his invasion, he decided to go back to fight against Russian fascism. He told me, ‘you know, if Putin wins, fascism will win in the world’. And I told him, ‘you are totally right. The problem is that if Zelensky wins, fascism will win in the world!’ This is the situation in which we are now. My father was a partisan against the Nazis during the Second World War.⁸ So, I should fight; I should stay with the resistance.

Anyway, in the end, I decided that the only thing to do is to quit everything. And so the book starts with these Eastern European scenarios. But it is not book about politics or war. It is a book totally about depression. Actually, the subtitle is ‘interpreting depression’. Why? Because the point is that fascism is everywhere. We have to come to terms with this global condition that my generation could not imagine would happen. I did not imagine the possibility of Putin on one side and an army with Nazis on the other. Never would I have imagined it. Well, that’s not really true. In the last 20 or 30 years, I started to imagine it, but my point is that it was not part of my generation’s imagination five decades ago.

At the same time, we are facing a phenomenon of escalating depression for the younger generation that is not only psychological, but is also a directly social, cultural phenomenon. Is it really depression? I start with the concept of depression in the psychoanalytical literature, and I compare it with the growing attitude of a new generation who call themselves ‘the last generation’. It’s the first time in one million years that human culture has the realistic possibility of thinking it will be the last, that it can encounter the termination of humankind. In this context, I try to interpret the concept of depression in a different way to how it is commonly understood, not as a decrease in desire but as an intentional, conscious withdrawal of desire, as if to say, ‘we will not desire anymore’.

NV: It’s hard not to think of Mark Fisher’s work here and the politicisation

⁸ The partisans were a group of Jewish guerilla fighters who resisted Nazi occupation across Europe during the Second World War.

of depression. Does the conscious withdrawal of desire make space for depression to enter the political or is it the opposite? Withdrawal not only of desire but of politics?

FB: I don't see much of the political here, but it depends on what you mean by politics. Politics for me means the technology or the art that makes possible the rational government of reality. Since Machiavelli, politics is the project of a rational government over the complexity of reality. This is over nowadays. You don't have any political project of rationally-governed reality. Rational reason has disappeared from politics in the time of Jair Bolsonaro, Donald Trump, Javier Milei—reason is cast out of the scene of politics. But, also, government is out of the scene, not the problem of governing, but the problem of reacting, of protecting yourself from aggression and so on.

I think the science, theory, knowledge that can help us understand the current situation is not politics but *psychopathology*. We have to think of the ongoing global situation in psychopathological terms. Look at the Gaza. Look at Israel. You cannot speak of it in political terms. It is not politics. You have two forms of psychosis. The psychosis of the oppressed—the Hamas attacks were not driven by a rational strategy but by the desire of revenge. And, on the other side, you have the long consequences of Holocaust victimisation that is producing long-lasting effects in the unconscious of Israeli culture. Ferenczi said we don't have the tools to understand mass psychosis in 1919. Hitler is coming. Fascism is emerging everywhere at that time. We are in exactly the same situation; fascism is expanding everywhere.

NV: What happens, then, when there is a mass withdrawal in these circumstances?

FB: Well, the book came out in April. I did 14 talks in Italy, in universities and social centres. The audiences were big, much bigger than 10 years ago. And the people who came were mostly young. This is new for me; it was not my old colleagues, but young people—the post-Covid generation. Their

way of speaking, discussing, asking questions had nothing to do with the old experience of autonomy, nothing of that. The Marxist references have been forgotten. They just have a sense of impotence, what the psychoanalysts would call depression. But, in my opinion, it's not depression, but the coming consciousness of being lost.

What can we do? How will we live? How will we survive? Because when I say 'desertion', I don't only mean desert war. Desert work! The Great Resignation is the most interesting symptom of desertion. You have millions of people who didn't go back to their job during or after Covid. Fewer people are looking for work. This is new. Those people who have grown up in the last 20 or 30 years, the so-called millennials, how will they survive? That is the question. I have no answer, of course.

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