After the Future – Franco “Bifo” Berardi

Reviewed by Matt Bernico


Franco Berardi’s After the Future explains the changing terrain of the future. The future has become precarious. Twentieth century politics had a grasp on the future; it would be the realization of speed, progress and human strength. This notion of the future is rooted in modern capitalism, the indefinite expansion of capitalism into every corner of the world and of life. Berardi posits that all modern political ideologies share a “true faith” in the future and progress. When Berardi speaks of the future, he is not speaking of the temporal direction of time, but rather the shared imaginary of progress and utopia. To outline this conception of the future concretely, Berardi falls back on the Manifesto of Futurism from Filippo Marinetti. Marinetti’s manifesto paints a picture of the future as masculine utopia of strength and speed.

Berardi recognizes 1977 as the end of the future. He cites the punk movement’s declaration of “No Future.” Berardi says, “The future is not a natural dimension of the mind. It is a modality of projection and imagination, a feature of expectation and attention, and its modalities and features change with the changing of cultures. Futurism is the artistic movement that embodies and asserts the accomplished modernity of the future.” 1977 signaled the shift from future as utopia to future as dystopia. This inversion of the future threatens the collective imagination. Where the future was once a promise for progress, there is now only the precariousness of life. The possibility of devastation and catastrophe has caused a general paralysis of the will. This paralysis of will is founded in the triumph of general depression across the population.

The precariousness of daily life bleeds into the sphere of labor and production. Berardi seizes this opportunity to elaborate on a term he puts forth in other works, the precariat. The precariat is the aggregate of precarious proletariat. It is the work force held captive to labor that no longer has the defined rules of labor relations, salary or the length of the workday. Further, Berardi conceives of infolabor as the primary type of work of the precariat. Infolabor is the further abstraction of labor from concrete activity. Capitalism, or what Berardi designates as semiocapital, no longer operates on wage labor. Semiocapital buys packets of time to recombine in varieties of way. Berardi goes on to say, “cells of productive time can be
mobilized in punctual, casual, and fragmentary forms. The recombination of these segments is automatically realized in the network. The mobile phone is the tool that makes possible the connection between the needs of semiocapital and the mobilization of the living labor of cyberspace. The ringtone of the mobile phone calls the workers to reconnect their abstract time to the reticular flux.” Semiocapital has perfected the method of extracting labor from workers, the eight-hour workday has disappeared and no one has noticed.

Infolabor coerces and exploits cognitive workers in new and efficient ways. Berardi explains how the exploitation of cognitive laborers (cognitariat) severely damages the relation of the worker to the workers labor. 20th century struggles of labor were based on the liberation of labor and based on the organization against capital based on the solidarity of workers. However, infolabor and the fractalization of labor time destroys the bonds shared by laborers. Berardi goes as far to say, “In order for struggles to form a cycle there must be a spatial proximity of laboring bodies and existential temporal continuity. Without this proximity and this continuity, we lack the conditions for cellularized bodies to become a community.” Infolabor problematizes the liberation of labor from capitalism. Where there are no actual bodies, there can be no human connection and struggle. Humans are no longer conscious actors because there is a disconnect between their cognitive labor power and their production.

What can be done in the face of the exploitation of cognitive labor in semiocapital? Berardi’s political praxis is based on the conjunction of Baudrillard’s theory of catastrophe and autonomist theory. Berardi explains that semiocapital will eventually turn on itself like a “scorpion does when encircled by the challenge of death.” Baudrillard outlines this in his short text, The Spirit of Terrorism. On the topic of globalized power and the event of 9/11 Baudrillard says, “…the increase in the power of power heightens the will to destroy it. And it was party to its own destruction. When the two towers collapsed, you had the impression that they were responding to the suicide of the suicide-planes with their own suicides. It has been said that ‘Even God cannot declare war on Himself.’ Well, he can.” Insurrectionary power has not been able to stop globalization, but suicide short circuits globalization.

Based on Baudrillard’s observations Berardi proposes a politics and activism based on radical passivity. This passivity is toward the relentless production of semiocapitalism. This passivity is an autonomous action of creative withdrawal. Berardi suggests a new refusal to work and refusal to participate in economic exchange and accumulation and re-organizing the general intellect toward the use of the common good. However, this kind of struggle is still on the
horizon because of the incapacitating power of precariousness. Berardi predicts a new communism on the horizon based on necessity of collective action.

Why resist now if no subjectivity is possible? If a catastrophic event is necessary why put forth radical energies in the mean time? Berardi concludes his book by answering this question. Berardi qualifies his answer by explaining that things seem bleak, but he is just being honest about the impossibility of resistance. So why resist when a radical subjectivity is impossible? Berardi says, “I must resist simply because I cannot know what will happen after the future, and I must preserve the consciousness and sensibility of social solidarity, of human empathy, of gratuitous activity — of freedom, equality and fraternity. Just in case, right? Just because we don’t know what is going to happen next…I must resist because this is the only way to be in peace with myself. In the name of self-love, we must resist…” Resistance despite the impossibility of resistance is necessary to preserve one’s consciousness. Defeating global imperial powers is not likely, but Berardi thinks there is reason to believe that something will happen, something that will allow for action against the current state of things.

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