

Review

After the Future. By Franco “Bifo” Berardi. Edited by Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thornburn. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011, 185p. (paperback) ISBN 1849350590. US List \$16.95

After the Future is the fourth English-language work from Italian media theorist Franco “Bifo” Berardi. A symptomatic read of contemporary “semiocapital” and the changes wrought by semiocapital on labor and subjectivity, *After the Future* adds to the growing number of Autonomist texts available in English. And while much of this interest stems from the widespread critical success of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (and its sequels, *Multitude* and *Commonwealth*), it also speaks to the relevance of Autonomist thinking to the financial and social crises of early twenty-first century. Emerging from both the workerist movement of the 1960s and the tremors of 1968, *Autonomia* represented a sustained effort to rethink the role of Marxist thought in a post-industrial and poststructural world. As it grapples with the emergence of high finance, the dotcom bubble, and the failure of the counterglobalization movement, *After the Future* reminds us of the continued importance of this tradition to what might be called the post-industrial left.

Berardi’s foundational thesis in *After the Future*—that in the present “the goods that are circulating in the economic world...are signs, figures, images, projections, expectations”—suggests the interest that this book should hold for scholars of communication, political economy, and cultural studies (100). From this foundation, Berardi sets out to study how semiocapital has in turn transformed labor, subjectivity, and political activism. Chapter one, “The Century that Trusted the Future,” traces how the futurist movement anticipated the emergence of semiocapital and has continued to shape our relationship to progress and the future. Chapter two, “The Zero Zero Decade” examines how the contemporary cyberculture—represented by dotcoms, finance capital, and cognitive labor—has in turn led to the transformation of labor and political action. Chapter three, “Baroque and Semiocapital,” argues that contemporary capitalist production, and its reliance on violence and high finance criminality, reflects baroque rather than protestant modernity. Finally, chapter four, “Exhaustion and Subjectivity,” examines the impact of semiocapital on subjectivity and political action, and the manner in which capital has disrupted older forms of political activism.

While *After the Future* seems to cover a lot of disparate ground in under two hundred pages, there are a number of key arguments that recur throughout the book. Perhaps the most important of these is Berardi’s contention that semiocapital has made cognitive rather than industrial labor the primary means of value creation. For Berardi, cognitive labor is defined by its engagement with “recombinant” information technologies and by its reliance on language (84). But just as important as this shift in value creation is what Berardi calls the “precarization” of labor, or the process by which smaller and smaller “fractals” of a worker’s time are bought and discarded (88). Ironically, this process of precarization occurs alongside the overproduction of discourse (now a primary means of creating value), an over-

production that in turn threatens capital's ability to reconcile value and labor time (90). Under these conditions, "language is made precarious," unable to function as anything other than an unstable vehicle of semiocapital (131).

The precarization of language has important consequences for political discourse, which shifts from being a vehicle for consensus or dissent to being instead a form of media spectacle (106). Berardi elaborates these claims by looking at the rise of Silvio Berlusconi within Italian politics. Berlusconi's importance lies not in his effective takeover of Italy's media and political institutions, but rather in his admission that political discourse has become little more than idle chatter—at once divorced from political consequence while at the same time central to the creation of capitalist value (117). Berlusconi thus helps explain not only the way in which Italy has over the last thirty years been a laboratory for semiocapital, but also the manner in which older forms of political action have been separated from their targets: "[s]peculation and spectacle intermingle, because of the inflationary (metaphoric) nature of language" (100). For Berardi, this separation has in turn led to the failure of political activism and the eclipse of social movements, as collective action fails to achieve autonomy from the political and economic institutions it seeks to challenge (123).

Perhaps the most provocative of Berardi's claims in this regard is that semiocapital should be understood not just as an economic formation, but rather as a psychopathology defined by panic, depression, and exhaustion (94). Stripped of its capacity for political action, and victim of a constant overload of information, the individual lives in a constant state of panic. But in distinction to the work of other autonomists such as Hardt and Negri, Berardi is unable to offer a political model for resisting the deleterious consequences of finance capital. The precarization of labor within cyberculture has itself made social composition—the process of fostering collective political action—impossible. Instead, "you see actions, but you don't see an actor" (125). This can be seen, for Berardi, in the failure of political activism and in the rise of suicide as a viable response to financial and cultural exploitation (148). Berardi is certainly not without a measure of hope: cognitive labor's challenge to capitalist theories of value, and the collective nature of cognitive work, at least hold open the possibility that "communism is coming back" (151). But beyond that, Berardi argues he is only able to act "as if" older political models might offer a viable means of resistance (163). But in a world where language has itself become precarious—at once the primary means of creating value but also an unstable vehicle for political action—political activism no longer holds the promise it once did.

For those committed to more traditional forms of solidarity and collective action, Berardi's analysis in *After the Future* might seem defeatist or even flippant. Likewise, his failure to outline a meaningful political program in what is quite obviously intended as a polemic work may leave readers feeling short-changed. Of more concern to readers may be the manner in which Berardi appears to overlook persistent forms of industrial labor in both the first and third worlds. These forms of labor have likewise become mobile and increasingly precarious under finance capital, with jobs being tied to stock prices and shareholder value rather than production. While this is certainly consistent with—and even assumed within—Berardi's analysis, left cultural critics made be left wondering about whether the

cognitariat has really so completely replaced the industrial working class.

But despite these potential shortcomings, Berardi's *After the Future* represents a serious attempt to think through finance capital's challenge to older models of political economy and collective action. Berardi not only provides a useful vocabulary for understanding the development of semiocapital, but also a preliminary answer to the question: what then do we do with language? In an economy defined by floating symbolic value, one that evacuates political discourse of its meaning, this question is one that increasingly haunts cultural critics and communication scholars. And while Berardi suggests that it may be a question that ultimately cannot be answered, it is one we must continue to pose as we "search for a way out" (14).

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