

Franco Berardi Bifo

Exhaustion and Senile Utopia of the Coming European Insurrection

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Figures such as Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, among many others, have stressed in the past that we need to create institutions for unified political decisions at the level of the European Union. In the aftermath of the Greek debt crisis, it seems that the Europhile intellectuals have gotten what they asked for. The EU entity has been subjected to a sort of political directorate that has unfortunately only served to reveal that financial interests lie at the heart of the Union's priorities. The early stage of the European tragedy has manifested itself as a political enforcement of the financial domination of European society.

The institutions of the welfare state have been under attack for thirty years: full employment, labor rights, social security, retirement, public schools, public transportation – all of these areas have been weakened, neglected, or destroyed. After thirty years of neoliberal obsession, we arrive at a collapse. What comes next? The ruling class answers coarsely: more of the same. Further reduction of public sector salaries, further raising of the age of retirement. No respect for society's needs and the rights of workers.

Thatcher said thirty years ago that there is no such thing as society, and today this statement comes across as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Society is in fact dissolving, leaving space to a jungle where everyone fights against one another. Following the Greek crisis, the monetarist dogma has been strongly reinforced, as if more poison could act as an antidote. Reducing demand will lead to recession, and the only result will be to further concentrate capital in the hands of the financial class and further impoverish the working class.

Following the Greek financial crisis, emergency law was declared: a self-proclaimed Merkel-Sarkozy-Trichet directorate imposed a deflationary policy to be forced on the various national governments of European countries. In order to rescue the financial system, this self-proclaimed directorate diverts resources from society to the banks. And in order to revive the failed philosophy of neoliberalism, social spending is cut, salaries are lowered, the retirement age is raised, and the younger working generation is precarized. Those who do not acknowledge the great necessities of competition and growth will be cut out. Those who choose to play the game will have to accept any punishment, any renunciation, any suffering demanded by the great necessity. But who said that we must absolutely be part of this?

So far, the result of the collapse of neoliberal politics has been its confirmation and consolidation. When the American financial system collapsed, there was a general



expectation that capital concentration would be abandoned or at least diminished, as a redistribution of wealth seemed necessary to rescue the economy. This has not taken place. The Keynesian way has not even been explored, and Paul Krugman has been left to repeat a series of perfectly reasonable options that no one is willing to consider.

Thanks to the crisis, American society has been robbed by big finance, and now Europe is following with its own mathematical ferocity. Is there any chance of stopping this insane race? A social explosion is possible, as it is apparent that living conditions will soon become unbearable. But precarious labor and the decomposition of social solidarity may open the way to a frightening outcome: ethnic civil war on continental scale, and the dismantling of the Union, which would unleash the worst instincts of nations.

In Paris, London, Barcelona, Rome, and Athens, massive demonstrations have erupted to protest the restrictive measures, but this movement is not going to stop the catastrophic aggression against social life, because the European Union is not a democracy, but a financial dictatorship whose politics are the result of unquestioned decision-making processes.

Peaceful demonstrations will not suffice to change the course of things and violent explosions will be too easily exploited by racists and criminals. A deep change in social perception and social lifestyle will compel a growing part of society to withdraw from the economic field, from the game of work and consumption. These people will abandon individual consumption to create new, enhanced forms of co-habitation, a village economy within the metropolis.

Unless one is seized by avarice or psychotic obsession, all a human being wants is a pleasant, possibly long life, to consume what is necessary to keep fit and make love. "Civilization" is the pompous name given to all the political or moral values that make the pursuit of this lifestyle possible. Meanwhile, the financial dogma states that if we want to be part of the game played in banks and markets, we must give up a pleasant, quiet life. We must give up civilization.

But why should we accept this exchange? Europe's wealth does not come from the stability of the Euro or international markets, or the managers' ability to monitor their profits. Europe is wealthy because it has millions of intellectuals, scientists, technicians, doctors, and poets. It has millions of workers who have augmented their technical knowledge for centuries. Europe is wealthy because it has

historically managed to valorize competence, and not just competition, to welcome and integrate other cultures. And, it must be said, it is also wealthy because for four centuries it has ferociously exploited the physical and human resources of other continents.

We must give something up, but what exactly? Certainly we must give up the hyper-consumption imposed on us by large corporations, but not the tradition of humanism, enlightenment, and socialism – not freedom, rights, and welfare. And this is not because we are attached to old principles of the past, but because it is these principles that make it possible to live decently.

The prospect of a revolution is not open to us. The concept of revolution no longer corresponds to anything, because it entails an exaggerated notion of the political will over the complexity of contemporary society. Our main prospect is to shift to a new paradigm not centered on product growth, profit, and accumulation, but on the full unfolding of the power of collective intelligence.

Platitudes

The European tragedy has been founded on a false representation of social reality, based on some assumptions that contradict daily experience, but are nevertheless delivered as absolute truth, as unquestionable dogma.

Platitude 1: Public spending must be drastically cut if European budgets are to be balanced. In fact, European states have been cutting their budgets over the last thirty years, and are now diverting financial resources from social infrastructure towards banks and corporations. This diversion has already produced extensive damage, and will produce more.

Platitude 2: The European economy must compete with the emerging economies of developing countries, and this can happen only by reducing labor costs. This means that in order to become competitive, in a strictly economical sense, European life should be impoverished. And this is what is happening: unemployment is rising, education is being privatized, and racism is spreading. Nobody has ever explained why the only criterion for evaluating wealth must be financial in nature.

Platitude 3: The European worker's productivity must be increased while salaries must be reduced. This produces an effect of low demand, deflation, and depression, but also overproduction. 40 percent of cars produced in Europe will not find buyers (thank God). So why should carmakers seek to increase the productivity of their already hyper-exploited workers? Consumption declines because

salaries shrink, but also because Europeans simply do not need any more cars.

Platitude 4: The age of retirement must be raised, as there will be too many young people and too few old people in the future. The retirement age has already been raised in every European country, and now in France as well. But the rationale does not make sense. The productivity of the average European worker has increased fivefold over the past fifty years, so when the time comes, fewer young people actually will be able to feed more old people. But in reality, raising the retirement age has nothing to do with any social concern whatsoever. Rather, it is a trick for reducing labor costs. Capitalists would much rather pay a poor, old worker a salary than a deserved pension, and leave the young to find their own way, accepting any kind of occupation, whether precarious or simply underpaid.

No European politician dares to question these fundamental platitudes. And those who protest against these devastating measures are accused of being unable to comprehend the task at hand: to advance the deregulation that produced the present collapse. The late-neoliberal ruling class states that if deregulation produced the systemic collapse, we need more deregulation. If lower taxation on high incomes led to a fall in demand, let's lower high-income taxation. If hyper-exploitation resulted in the production of unsold and useless cars, let's intensify car production. Are these people crazy? Perhaps they are panicking, in fear of their own impotence.

Aesthetics of Europe

The aesthetics of the European Union is cold by definition. The European Union was born in the aftermath of World War II with the goal of overcoming old nationalist and ideological passions, and here lies its progressive and pragmatic nature. Lately, however, this founding anti-mythological myth seems to have been blurred, confused, forgotten. In the words of Ève Charrin:

Europe is peace, Europe is prosperity ... Granite, glass and concrete: depressing architectural neutrality ... This modesty without grace is a way of pretending that we are not political (rather, we are only managing).¹

Charrin expresses the aesthetic predicament of the European Union over the past decades, but such an apathetic way of being together was only possible under prosperous conditions. Insofar as a growing level of consumption could be guaranteed within the EU, monetarist rule could

favor economic growth, and the EU could exist as an entity. It is a fiction of democracy governed by an autocratic organism, the European Central Bank. While the US Federal Reserve was established to stabilize the value of currency and maximize employment, the primary goal of the ECB charter is to fight inflation. Now this goal has become irrational, as deflation is the overwhelming trend.

Citizens can do nothing to influence the politics of the ECB, as the Bank does not respond to political authority, and this is why European citizens have been conscious of the vacuity of European elections. In the future, these citizens will come to view the EU as their enemy.

Social movements should focus on a founding myth of European history: the myth of energy. Modern culture and political imagination have emphasized the virtues of youth, of passion and energy, aggressiveness and growth. Capitalism is based on the exploitation of physical energy, and semiocapitalism has subjugated the nervous energy of society to the point of collapse. The notion of exhaustion has always been anathema to the discourse of modernity, of romantic Sturm und Drang, of the Faustian drive to immortality, the endless thirst for economic growth and profit, the denial of organic limits.

The romantic cult of youth is the cultural source of nationalism. In the colonial era, British and French nationalism was the cultural condition of colonial expansion, but in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, nationalism resurfaced to express the self-affirmation of young countries (Italy, Japan, and Germany), while the old empires (Russia, Austria, and the Ottomans) headed towards collapse. Nationalism also affirms the role of the young generation at the cultural and economic level. Old-fashioned styles are devalued, old people and women are despised for their weakness. Fascism always depicts itself as the young nation.

In late modernity, this depiction became an essential feature of advertising. But contrary to Fascist discourse, late modern advertising did not abuse old age, but denied it, claiming that every old person could be young if he or she would simply accept to partake in the consumerist feast. As Norman Spinrad showed in his novel *Bug Jack Barron* (1967), the denial of age and time marks the ultimate delirium of the global class.

The Fascism that triumphed in Italy after 1922 can be seen as the *energolatrea* (worshipping of energy) of the young. Now, Berlusconi re-stages the same arrogance, but the actors of the present comedy are old men who require make up and Viagra to inhabit an

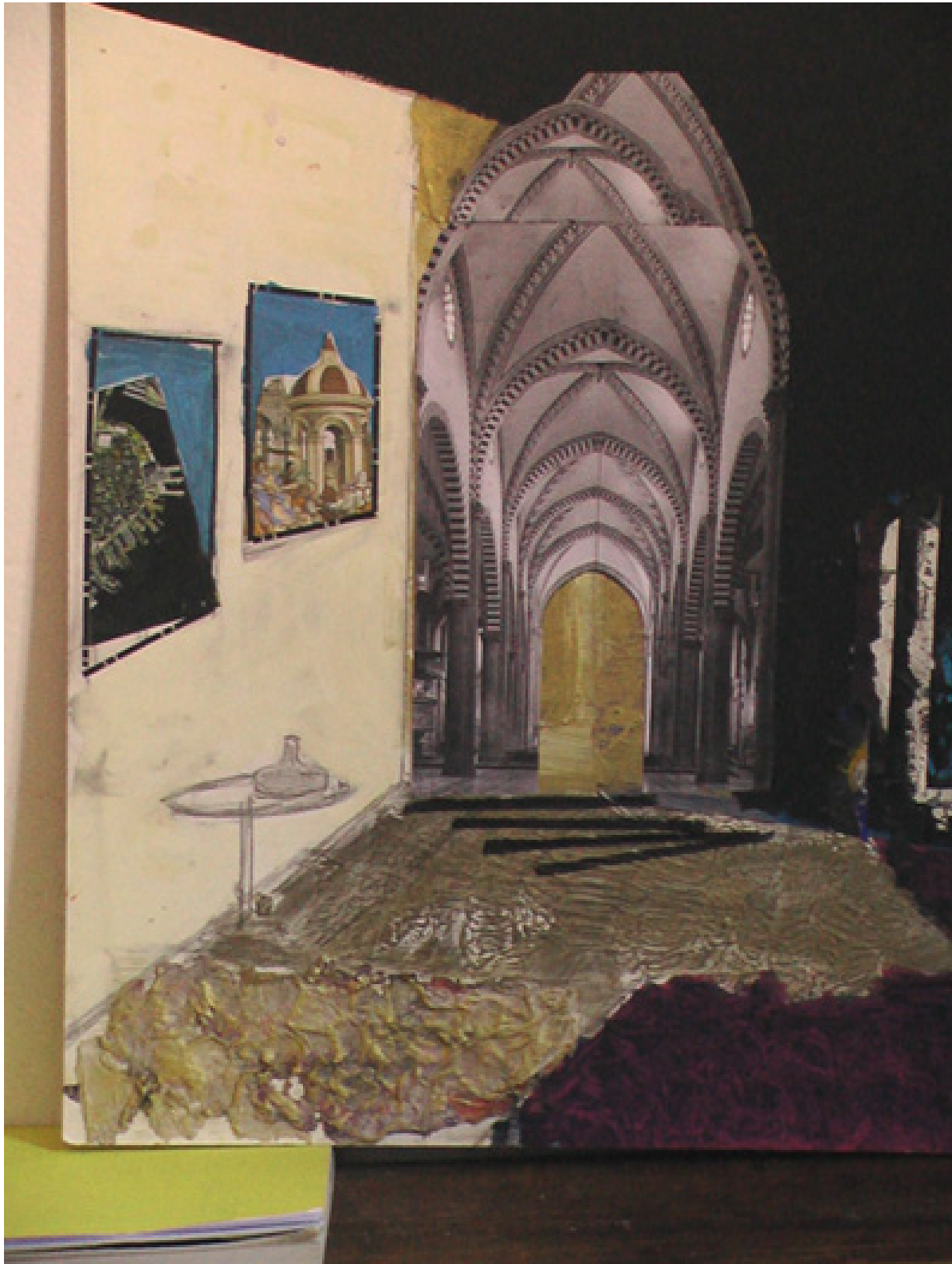


image of energy and potency. Like the heroic mythology of Fascism, as well as the mythology of advertising embodied by Berlusconi's subculture, the myth is based on a delirium of power. Where the former was based on the youthful virtues of strength, energy, and pride, the latter employs the mature virtues of technique, deception, and finance. And while the nemesis that followed the youthful violence of Fascism in Italy was World War II and its unthinkable mass of destruction and death, one must ask what nemesis will be brought about by the present *energolatrea* of the old people?

With very few exceptions, literature and cinema have scarcely dealt with the subject of love between the elderly. It is a subject we know very little about, simply because old people have never really existed. Until some decades ago, it was rare to find a person older than sixty, and while many that were would be surrounded by an aura of respect and veneration, many others were banished to the border of society, where they would find themselves alone, deprived of the means of survival, and unable to form a community. We know very little about growing old, and we know nothing about the emotions of the elderly and their ability of social organization, solidarity, and political force. We don't know because we have not experienced it. But that experience is now beginning.

The destiny of Europe will be played out in the biopolitical sphere, at the border between consumerism, techno-sanitarian youth-styled aggressiveness, and possible collective consciousness of the limits of the biological (sensitive) organism. The age of senilization is here, and Europe is the place where this experience will first find its voice.

A Therapeutic Paradox

Exhaustion has no place in Western culture, and this has become a problem, for exhaustion now needs to be understood and accepted as a new paradigm for social life. Its cultural and psychic articulation will open the door to a new conception of prosperity and happiness. The coming European insurrection will not be driven by energy, but by slowness, withdrawal, and exhaustion. It will be the autonomization of the collective body and soul from exploitation by means of speed and competition.

Western people were first advised of exhaustion in 1972, when the Club of Rome commissioned the book *The Limits to Growth*.² For the first time, we became aware that the physical resources of the planet are not boundless. Some months after the publication of the report, the Western world experienced the first oil shortage following the Yom Kippur war in 1973. Since then, we are expected to be

conscious of the fact that energy is leaving the physical body of the Earth. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the collapse of the dot-com economy led to the pauperization and precarization of cognitive workers, while the financial meltdown of September 2008 initiated a process of pauperization and precarization of overall society. Western culture is unprepared to deal with the patterns exposed by these crises, because it is a culture based on the identification of energy and good, of expansion and social well-being.

At the moment the change in perception towards exhaustion seems rather dark and depressing, because the game is played following the rules of modern *energolatrea*: growth. In the coming years one third of the European population – the generation born after World War II, when the fulfillment of the modern promise of peace, democracy, and well-being was apparently at hand – will reach old age. The new generation now entering the labor market does not possess the memory of this past civilization, nor the political force to defend their existence from the predatory economy. The age of senility is here, and it may introduce a generalized form of *dementia senilis*: fear of the unknown, xenophobia, loss of historical memory. But in a different scenario – one that we should anticipate at the cultural level – the process of senilization may open the way to a cultural revolution based on the force of exhaustion, of facing the inevitable with grace, discovering the sensuous slowness of those who do not expect any more from life than wisdom – the wisdom of those who have seen a great deal without forgetting, who look at each thing as if for the first time.

This is the lesson that Europe may learn if it can come out from the capitalist obsession with accumulation, property, and greed. In a reversal of the energetic subjectivation that animated the revolutionary theories of the twentieth century, radicalism should abandon the mode of activism, and adopt a passive mode. A radical passivity would dispel the ethos of relentless productivity that neoliberal politics has imposed. The mother of all the bubbles, the bubble of work, would finally deflate. We have been working too much over the past three or four centuries, and outrageously too much over the last thirty years. If a creative consciousness of exhaustion could arise, the current depression may mark the beginning of a massive abandonment of competition, consumerist drive, and dependence on work.

Anthropologist Gregory Bateson would define the European malaise in terms of a double bind, or contradictory injunction, with a paradoxical solution that could be this: don't be

afraid of decline. Decline and de-growth imply a divestment in the midst of frenzied competition, and this is the paradox that may bring us out of the neoliberal double bind.

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Ève Charrin, "La Belgique, vertige de l'Europe," *Esprit* no. 353 (March–April 2009): 31–42. See http://www.esprit.presse.fr/archive/review/rt_download.php?code=14791.

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Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers, William Bahrens, *The Limits to Growth* (New York: Potomac Association, 1972).

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