

Franco Berardi Bifo  
**I Want to Think:  
POST-U**

01/05

**Poison**

While the Japanese tragedy has exposed the poisonous effects of the subjugation of knowledge by an obsession with capitalist accumulation, we should be able to consider what possibilities remain available for creating an autonomy for knowledge from capitalism in the future. We should be able to imagine a pathway for knowledge workers to self-organize, and we should be able to create the institutions, or models for future institutions, of knowledge production and transmission. The complex mutation of knowledge production and transmission, and the related transformation – or devastation – of modern institutions of education, has been a crucial outcome of financial dictatorship in the sphere of semiocapital.



Drawing from the Bologna collective Traumfabrik, ca. 1970s.

**Net Economy**

Let's not forget that in the 1990s – when the web prompted a new environment for cognitive activity, mutating the very methodology of producing and distributing knowledge – many theorists, technologists, and economists spoke optimistically of a long, inexhaustible economic boom, spreading the idea that collective intelligence and capitalism were finally allied. This was true in some sense, for the decade was marked by the widespread proliferation of dot-com enterprises that acted as a space for empowering cognitive labor, offering a degree of partial self-determination. Cognitive workers,

engineers, artists, and scientists could create small, dynamic structures for communication and common production. But this did not last. The 2000 downturn of the virtual economy, the dot-com crash that followed, and the simultaneous change in cultural and political climate triggered a reversal, and a process by which the subjectivity of the general intellect began to be dismantled. The potency of mental activity came to be separated from the collective body, from the social circuitry of life.

### Enslavement

In this process of this dismantling, labor has been precarized, living time has been fractalized, and collective intelligence has been subjugated. European governments' attack on the educational system is the final blow to the autonomy of knowledge. The subjectivity of the general intellect is dismantled as a precondition to a much broader subjugation of the processes of knowledge, to the techno-linguistic enslavement of cognitive behavior in the sphere of production and consumption.

### Sensibility

The cognitive performance of the precarious worker must become compatible, fractal, recombinable. Cognitive ability must be detached from sensibility, from the ability to detect, interpret, and understand signs that cannot be translated into words. The standardization of the cognitive process involves a digital formatting of the mind, disturbing the sphere of sensibility, and finally destroying it.

### University

In the transition from the bourgeois era of industrial capitalism to the digital-financial era of semicapital, mental energy (cognition) shifts to become the main force of valorization. This process implies a special kind of incorporation (Marx uses the word "subsumption") of mental energy. This incorporation implies a standardization and formatting of the cognitive body, and bodily meaning and meaningful bodies are erased as a result of this formatting. A decisive step in this subsumption process comes in replacing the modern institution of the university with a recombinant system for exploiting knowledge and canceling its autonomy. Since the 1999 Bologna Charter outlining the European educational system's transformation within a neoliberal framework, the autonomy of university and school has been under attack.

### Reason

The concept of autonomy has a crucial place in the definition of the modern university. It is not

only a political concept – referring to the interdependency of the academic institution – but also an epistemological concept, referring to the inherent methodology of scientific knowledge and artistic practice by which each field of knowledge establishes its laws, its conventions, aims, procedures, verification, and change. During the bourgeois era, the university was based on two pillars: the relation between intellectuals and the city, and the ethical and political role of reason. The second pillar marked the autonomy of research and teaching, of the process of discovery, innovation, of the production and transmission of moral, scientific, and technical acquisitions. As for the first, the bourgeoisie were strongly linked to the territory of their properties and concerned with their development, and these owners and entrepreneurs understood the autonomy of knowledge to be necessary for achieving productive results. The long process of emancipation from theocratic dogma deeply influenced bourgeois culture and identity throughout modern times.

### Biopolitics

The post-bourgeois era came about through a financialization of the economy and a de-localization of work and information. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault foresees the process by which neoliberal transformation would later construct the *homo economicus* – translating every idea and every act into economic terms and abolishing the autonomy of knowledge as economy fully takes hold of social life.

I do not believe that an economic science really exists. The neoliberal economy is a technology that exploits the conceptual toolbox of economic study, transforming life into value and crystallizing time as capital. This normative technology has progressively acquired a central position in the system of knowledge and research, with every act of research, teaching, learning, and inventing subjected to economic concerns: Can it be rented? Does it aid economic growth? Does it answer our corporate financiers' demands?

### Reformation

The European educational system's current process of so-called reform is marked by de-financing, cuts, job losses, and also by a downsizing of non-rentable disciplinary fields – the so-called humanities – accompanied by the increased support of capital-intensive fields of research. The leading principle of this reform is the assertion of the epistemological primacy of the economic sphere.

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Flavio De Marco, *Paesaggio (Landscape)*, 2001. Acrilic on Canvas.

## Margins

Those who do not recognize the primacy of the economic principle in the field of education – and who refuse to worship the central dogma of the neoliberal church and its rules of competition, profitability, and compatibility – are labeled as skeptics, non-believers, atheists, and subsequently marginalized and expelled. A new process is now emerging from the margins, from the spaces outside of the jurisdiction of this new order.

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A/traverso Archive, 1977.

## Self-organization

While analyzing the decomposition of the educational system we inherited, we should be able to detect and connect the points of cognitarian self-organization that rise from our experiences of conflict, movement, and processes by which the social body is re-activated – from our experiences of insurrections. Conflicts and movements have been storming the European university since

October 2010, and they will expand their influence in the coming years. The strategy is not to reinstate the previous public education system, but rather to create institutions for the self-organization of the general intellect. Some post-university projects have already been initiated (the international circuit of the Nomad University, for instance) and a wide range of social groups are implementing processes of self-formation. We want to take part in this process by building skeptic locales of re-imagination. Skepticism is the non-dogmatic stance that we adopt against economic dogmatism and neoliberal arrogance.

## SCEPSI

SCEPSI begins with the following premise: no matter what the European authorities do, Europe is over. The evaporation of social energy, the falling expectations, and the final meltdown of finance are leading the EU to a total collapse. What is our imagination of Europe in the very moment of its possible dissolution?

## Poetry

What is the place of art in this game of reinventing the institution once called a university? Art is the decisive link between conscious mental activity and sensibility, and also between sensibility and sensitivity. During the last decade, art has played a crucial role in modeling the perception of a new form of alienation. If we think of experiences like Eija-Liisa Ahtila's video works, or Jonathan Franzen's *Corrections*, Gus Van Sant's *Elephant*, Miranda July's *No One Belongs Here More Than You* and *Me and You and Everyone We Know*, and *3-Iron* by Kim Ki-duk, to name just a few, we can consider the phenomenology of suffering in the age of the body and the soul's subjugation to the rhythm of semiocapital. Reactivating sensibility and sensitivity – the affective and sensuous understanding of the other – becomes key to a self-organization of collective intelligence. It is a therapeutic process of its own, a process that Félix Guattari would call simultaneously chaomotic and schizoanalytic. Poetry is the language of such a therapeutic project. The therapeutic and artistic act of poetry will open a new space for epistemological autonomy.

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On May 21st, in San Marino, a conference will mark the inauguration of SCEPSI, the European School of Social Imagination. In a marginal and rocky place, close to the Adriatic Sea and surrounded by a barbaric country, in the San Marino Republic we will create SCEPSI, centre of social research and political education, which will be dedicated to the imagination of a new horizon for the future of Europe. [www.scepsi.eu](http://www.scepsi.eu)

Franco Berardi, aka “Bifo,” founder of the famous “Radio Alice” in Bologna and an important figure of the Italian Autonomia Movement, is a writer, media theorist, and media activist. He currently teaches Social History of the Media at the Accademia di Brera, Milan.

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