

Franco “Bifo” Berardi
**Twenty Years
after Genoa**

01/05

In spring 1976, my city, Bologna, was experiencing a spring of cultural creativity, social solidarity, and political invention. At the tail end of almost a decade of continuous political militancy, I was invited to a closed-door meeting by a person who attended the same assemblies organized by students and militants that I did during that moment of cultural revolution. I accepted the invitation as I would have done with anyone who I met in those assemblies, even though I didn't know his name then, nor do I know it now.

He was a comrade and that was enough for me.

I went to the appointment in the outskirts of the city. When I arrived, there were just two people there: the person who had invited me, and a worker who was a little older than I was. Following the scents and gestures of the moment, I had guessed what the meeting would be about. They had been tasked with organizing the Bolognese column of the Red Brigades. They invited me to join.

We spoke for a couple of hours. I told them simply what I thought, what I still think: I don't believe the workers' movement needs an armed party. So, I did not join the Red Brigades, nor any other armed formations.

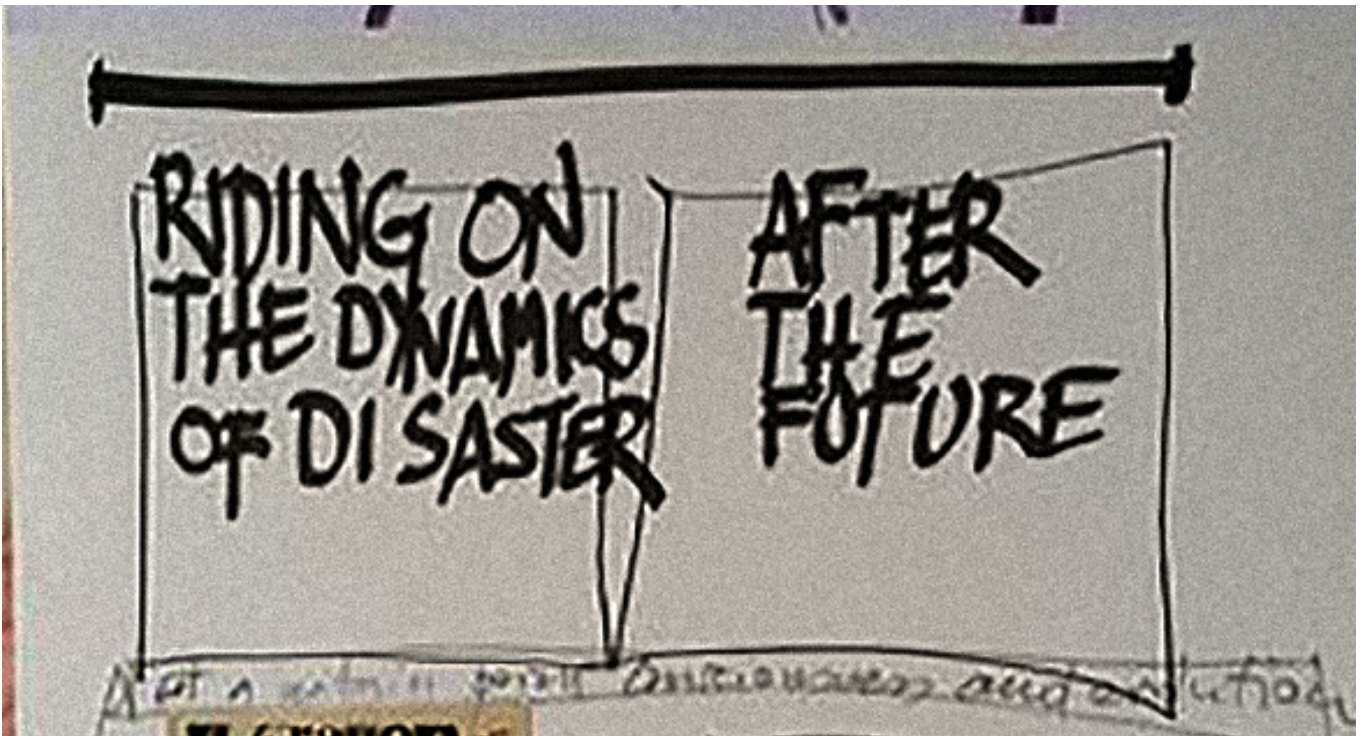
The next year, in 1977, during the student insurrection, I responded to the murderous violence of the repressive state's troops with symbolic violence. I broke some shop windows. But I have never exercised violence against other human beings. I have not killed, nor have I ever carried a firearm. But I don't consider this a positive ethical value. It is a privilege I have.

Whether we like it or not, the question of violence arises in the history of class struggle. And one cannot avoid it. For some of the people participating in class struggle, the contradiction between violence against the state and violence against people has yet to be resolved, even as it remains very present.

During the following decades, on several occasions, I came to blame myself for my refusal to enlist in armed struggle in the streets against capital and the state. One such moment of guilt was in July 2001, during the days of Genoa, when the police brutalized a huge demonstration protesting the G8 summit, murdered a student anarchist named Carlo Giuliani, and tortured hundreds of people – all so that they could protect Bush, Berlusconi, and Putin, who met to talk power in the luxurious Palazzo Ducale.¹

e-flux journal #120 — september 2021 Franco “Bifo” Berardi
Twenty Years after Genoa

02/05



Istubalz, *Urge* (detail), 2021.

That day, I remember thinking that even though I had lived a pretty comfortable life, perhaps it was not a fair one because I hadn't done everything I could have done to help eliminate the monsters before the monsters came to destroy us.

So, after Genoa I went to Himachal Pradesh in Northern India to visit a young Buddhist nun. I meditated and realized that the problem was not weapons. The Buddhist nun reminded me that they – the state – have professional armies; in terms of violence, we will always be amateurs. Rather than feeling calmed, I accepted the idea that there is no more room for hope.

After Genoa it seemed clear to me that humanity was destined for hell. Since neoliberalism has joined in alliance with Nazism, and since social subjectivity is less and less able to cultivate autonomy and friendship, the only prospect is a hell of growing precariousness, exploitation, misery, and mental and environmental devastation.

I despaired, and I haven't stopped despairing. But just because you stop "hoping" doesn't mean that you stop waiting for something else.

In summer 2001, I only had to wait a few months.

In September, revenge against the neoliberal order came from the skies above Manhattan, and the hell of Nazi-liberalism turned into the hell of war.

Those nineteen young men, led by a bearded assassin, landed a strategically winning blow. The demolition of a major symbol of the West triggered a process that twenty years later is in full swing: the process that is now leading to the end of Western civilization.

I am not sorry for the collapse of that symbol, nor am I sorry for the end of Western civilization, although I do not have "hope" that this instance of destruction will lead to any sort of liberation from the domination of capital or an end to the war that is being waged against humanity.

In 2002, I published a book titled *Un'estate all'inferno* (A summer in hell), where I recounted this descent into madness and authoritarian violence. In those recollections from the summer of 2001, I grappled with the same contradiction and emotions that I mentioned at the beginning

of this essay: the contradiction between private life and militancy, and the feeling of guilt that arises when the cops break down the door and wail on your comrades. When writing this text, on the twentieth anniversary of the murder of Carlo Giuliani and the beating, rape, and torture of thousands of youths in Genoa, I returned to a line I had written on the night that my wife and I returned to Bologna: "We were at a loss for words, we were out of breath. All that is transpiring can only mean that we are entering an era of rule by beasts."²

Today, after two decades of this rule by those beasts, capitalist domination endures because a subjectivity capable of emancipating itself is not able to emerge. When those thousands descended on Piazzale Kennedy in Genoa, when a collective subjectivity roared through the streets, the police of capitalist empire showed their fascist nature, as they have done many times since, in Ferguson, in Athens, in Santiago. But Western civilization is in agony. Maybe capitalism and the West are diverging. Either way, the capitalist kingdom of abstraction and accumulation remains strong while the living organism of humanity is breathless.

In Afghanistan, the West has now lost the holy war. The troops of the white race have fled, while friends of bin Laden have conquered the country.

The Middle East is disintegrating as an effect of the American invasion and occupation of Iraq.

The Americans promised to bomb Iraq back to the Stone Age if Saddam didn't give up his "weapons of mass destruction," which were never found. Now it is all of humanity that is returning to the Stone Age.

The defeat of the West in Afghanistan and Iraq is irremediable – not only because the West has been defeated militarily, but also because the moral and political values that the West hypocritically pretended to defend are now in tatters. Defending "democracy" was only a pretext for reasserting Western dominance. This defeat means that Western supremacy is now declining, while the emptiness of democracy is exposed.

The strategic genius of bin Laden (and above all the extraordinary imbecility of Bush, Rumsfeld, and Cheney) set in motion an unstoppable process of global civil war whose signs are everywhere. The greatest military power of all time no longer exists because it is at

03/05

e-flux journal #120 — september 2021 Franco "Bifo" Berardi
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war with itself, and from this war it will not come out alive.

The West is in chaos, sinking into dementia, into the fire of the forests of the American West, and into the mudslides of Northern Europe.

In Genoa, three hundred thousand people gathered twenty years ago. Their message: if this continues, we are doomed. If the capitalist plundering of the physical resources of the planet goes on, if the frantic exploitation of nervous energies proceeds as usual, then humankind is doomed.

The powerful of the world silenced us with violence, and in the name of profit they went on preparing for the final holocaust.

Now it is too late.

The fire is unstoppable, and every year it is destined to burn more and more.

The flood will not recede and every year it is destined to be swirl faster and faster, sucking into it everything and everything.

Maybe twenty years ago it was still possible to stop the apocalypse.

Now it is too late.

The European Commission promises that in 2035 we will all transition to electric cars, and that carbon emissions will be reduced to net zero by 2050.

Perhaps no one told them that the Amazon rainforest, once considered the lungs of the planet, today emits more CO2 than it absorbs.³

Branson is preparing shuttles to leave earth. Bezos spent eleven minutes in space. Let them both go to Mars and fuck themselves.

We'll stay here. We salute the defeat of the West. This does not, however, make us rejoice, since we remain trapped in capitalist abstraction. The West has lost the war against Islamic fundamentalism, but we cannot celebrate this either, since Islamic fundamentalists are waging their own campaign of terror and obscurantism. Nor can we celebrate the West's coming loss in the war against China, since China is the empire of automation, which forces millions into concentration camps and sentences young demonstrators in Hong Kong to decades in jail.

We'll stay here because we have no hope, and this makes us invincible.

x

04/05

e-flux journal #120 — september 2021 Franco "Bifo" Berardi
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Franco Berardi, aka “Bifo,” founder of the famous Radio Alice in Bologna and an important figure in the Italian Autonomia movement, is a writer, media theorist, and social activist.

e-flux journal #120 — september 2021 Franco “Bifo” Berardi
Twenty Years after Genoa

05/05

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For historical context and accounts of the demonstrations against the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa, which some consider the “high-water mark of an era of global protest,” see “Genoa 2001: Memoires from the Front Lines,” CrimethInc., July 20, 2021 <https://crimethinc.com/2021/07/20/genoa-2001-memories-from-the-front-lines-taking-on-the-g8-at-the-climax-of-a-movement>. For a short tribute to Carlo Giuliani, see “The 20th Anniversary of Carlo Giuliani,” Abolition Media Worldwide, July 18, 2021 <https://www.amwenglish.com/articles/the-20th-anniversary-of-carlo-giuliani/>.

2

The original reads: “Non avevamo più parole, non avevamo quasi più il fiato per respirare. Quello che stava accadendo significava che iniziava un’epoca di belve.” Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *Un’estate all’inferno* (Luca Sossella editore, 2002).

3

“Brazilian Amazon Released More Carbon than It Stored in 2010s,” *Science Daily*, April 30, 2021 <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2021/04/210430120343.htm>.