

# Franco “Bifo” Berardi The Coming '17

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e-flux journal #78 — december 2016 Franco “Bifo” Berardi  
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## The Interminable Collapse

The hundredth anniversary of the Soviet Revolution will likely coincide with a global collapse. The oft-announced recovery is not coming, and a rightist wave with racist undertones is mounting.

The collapse of capitalism will be interminable and enormously destructive, as long as a new subjectivity does not emerge and a different social model does not develop. The subjectivity that in the nineteenth century was expressed by the workers' movement appears today so disintegrated that we cannot imagine any possible recomposition in the near future.

The anti-financial uprisings of 2011 have not succeeded in reversing the route of financial plunder, and the European leftist parties have accepted austerity politics, even if this betrayal is likely to provoke their final defeat.

The dynamics that led to the ascent of the Nazis and then to the Second World War are back. Contemporary nationalist parties are echoing what Hitler said to the impoverished workers of Germany: you are not defeated and exploited workers, but national warriors, and you will win. They did not win, but they destroyed Europe. They will not win this time either, but they are poised to destroy the world.

The ongoing impoverishment of society is not a natural necessity, but a consequence of the politics of financial accumulation. The neoliberal model implements itself by force of automatism, while consensus melts away. The July 2016 issue of *The Economist* had the theme “Anarchy in the UK” and admitted the bankruptcy of neoliberal globalism. The symptoms are visible: stagnation; overproduction and then deflation; looming recession.

The sources of stagnation and unemployment – market saturation and the reduction of necessary labor time – are not inherently negative trends in themselves. On the contrary, from the perspective of social usefulness they prove that the era of scarcity is over and the emancipation of human time from repetitive work is imminent. The material basis now exists for people to devote their time to the care of others, self-care, education, and other non-market activities.

Capitalism, however, is semiotically unable to implement the potentialities inherent to knowledge and technology: its dynamic tends in fact to contain those potentialities within old frameworks of growth and accumulation. Consequently, it transforms the potentialities of knowledge and technology into factors of scarcity and destruction.

This distortion has impoverished European society and is unleashing an antiglobal reaction that is feeding resentment, fascism, and war.

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A film still from Sergei Eisenstein's movie *October: Ten Days that Shook the World* (1928). The scene depicts the storming of the Winter Palace during the October Revolution, 1917.

What will happen next?

### 1917 Will Not Happen Again

In the age of bio-info-political power, the Winter Palace is empty. But we must revisit 1917, because the Soviet Revolution established the paradigm that presided over the political landscape of the last century: the working class organized via political parties into a social vanguard, seeking to seize central power and use it against the capitalist class. The vision that Lenin expressed in his writings (particularly in *What Is To Be Done?*) provided a military framework for class struggle. This tactical move allowed the Bolshevik party to seize power, but this was also Lenin's strategic mistake, and maybe his crime. The Leninist party gave birth to a state and an army, but Lenin's determination turned class struggle into war, thereby suffocating the processes of revolutionary autonomy in Germany, Italy, and also in the United States, where the Industrial Workers of the World were expanding their social organization.

In order to win the war unleashed by the Leninist revolution, Western capitalism fomented fascism against the working class.

We know the story of what followed: Soviet communism and Anglo-American capitalism were forced into an alliance. Then democracy defeated the Soviet Union. In the second half of the century, democracy emerged as the winning mythology, but its triumph did not last. Beginning in Chile on September 11, 1973, the neoliberal reformation started cancelling democracy, and went on to cancel democracy everywhere else (including in Greece in July 2015). The dictatorship of the abstract over concrete life emerged under the label of neoliberal governance, which thrived more or less peacefully until the end of the '90s. Since the dot-com crash of spring 2000 and the new September 11 of the first year of the new century, the global landscape has fragmented into countless conflicting identities that are now exploding into a global civil war.

### Colonialism and Internationalism

Zbigniew Brzezinski, former adviser to US president Jimmy Carter, has written important books about the global political landscape. In 1993 he published *Out of Control: Global Turmoil on the Eve of the 21st Century*, a book in which he subverted the prevailing optimism of that period and predicted the uncontrollable proliferation of identitarian conflict.

In a recent issue of *The American Interest*, Brzezinski published an essay entitled "Toward a Global Realignment." Notwithstanding the flavorless title, the article contains a dramatic

consideration that may be summarized as follows: after centuries of colonial domination and violence, the former colonies are asking for a moral and economic restitution that the West is unwilling and unable to pay. The concrete historical debt we owe to those we have exploited cannot be paid because we are forced to pay our abstract financial debts.

Brzezinski's style in the essay is elegant, but his words are appalling and unequivocal. He deserves to be quoted at length:

Special attention should be focused on the non-Western world's newly politically aroused masses. Long-repressed political memories are fuelling in large part the sudden and very explosive awakening energised by Islamic extremists in the Middle East, but what is happening in the Middle East today may be just the beginning of a wider phenomenon to come out of Africa, Asia, and even among the pre-colonial peoples of the Western Hemisphere in the years ahead. Periodic massacres of their not-so-distant ancestors by colonists and associated wealth-seekers largely from Western Europe (countries that today are, still tentatively at least, most open to multiethnic cohabitation) resulted within the past two or so centuries in the slaughter of colonised peoples on a scale comparable to Nazi World War II crimes: literally involving hundreds of thousands and even millions of victims. Political self-assertion enhanced by delayed outrage and grief is a powerful force that is now surfacing, thirsting for revenge, not just in the Muslim Middle East but also very likely beyond.

In the sixteenth century, due largely to disease brought by Spanish explorers, the population of the native Aztec Empire in present-day Mexico declined from 25 million to approximately one million. Similarly, in North America, an estimated 90 percent of the native population died within the first five years of contact with European settlers, due primarily to diseases. In the 19th century, various wars and forced resettlements killed an additional 100,000. In India from 1857–1867, the British are suspected of killing up to one million civilians in reprisals stemming from the Indian Rebellion of 1857. The British East India Company's use of Indian agriculture to grow opium then essentially forced on China resulted in the premature deaths of millions, not including the directly inflicted Chinese casualties of

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Bolivian President Evo Morales presents Pope Francis with a crucifix carved into a wooden hammer and sickle, in La Paz, Bolivia, July, 2015. Photo: L'Osservatore Romano/Associated Press

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Participants in the second-largest furry convention in the U.S. wait outside the Hyatt Regency hotel in Rosemont, Illinois, after a criminal release of a toxic gas disrupts the convention and forces participants to evacuate the building, December, 2014.

the First and Second Opium Wars. In the Congo, which was the personal holding of Belgian King Leopold II, 10–15 million people were killed between 1890 and 1910. In Vietnam, recent estimates suggest that between one and three million civilians were killed from 1955 to 1975. As to the Muslim world in Russia's Caucasus, from 1864 and 1867, 90 percent of the local Circassian population was forcibly relocated and between 300,000 and 1.5 million either starved to death or were killed. Between 1916 and 1918, tens of thousands of Muslims were killed when 300,000 Turkic Muslims were forced by Russian authorities through the mountains of Central Asia and into China. In Indonesia, between 1835 and 1840, the Dutch occupiers killed an estimated 300,000 civilians. In Algeria, following a 15-year civil war from 1830–1845, French brutality, famine, and disease killed 1.5 million Algerians, nearly half the population. In neighboring Libya, the Italians forced Cyrenaicans into concentration camps, where an estimated 80,000 to 500,000 died between 1927 and 1934. More recently, in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989 the Soviet Union is estimated to have killed around one million civilians; two decades later, the United States has killed 26,000 civilians during its 15-year war in Afghanistan. In Iraq, 165,000 civilians have been killed by the United States and its allies in the past 13 years. (The disparity between the reported number of deaths inflicted by European colonisers compared with the United States and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan may be due in part to the technological advances that have resulted in the more productive use of force and in part as well to a shift in the world's normative climate.) Just as shocking as the scale of these atrocities is how quickly the West forgot about them.<sup>1</sup>

I agree with Brzezinski's diagnosis, but he forgets to say that in the twentieth century, internationalism emerged as a way to avert the kind of global conflict he describes. Only the workers' internationalist sentiment could avoid a planetary bloodbath. But communism has been defeated, and the internationalist way has dissolved. We now face a war of all against all for the sake of nothing.

### Depressed Subjectivity

After the dissolution of communism, the mythology of boundless competition and profit gained the upper hand. But after thirty years,

this mythology has gone totally bankrupt. Western subjectivity is angrily depressed, and Jonathan Franzen explains why:

People came to this country for either money or freedom. If you don't have money, you cling to your freedoms all the more angrily. Even if smoking kills you, even if you can't afford to feed your kids, even if your kids are getting shot down by maniacs with assault rifles. You may be poor, but the one thing nobody can take away from you is the freedom to fuck up your life whatever way you want to. That's what Bill Clinton figured out – that we can't win elections by running against personal liberties. Especially not against guns, actually.<sup>2</sup>

The promise of economic success has been achieved by only a small part of society. For the losers, it has resulted in precariousness, neuro-exploitation, a diminishing salary, and more work. But the losers are reclaiming their personal freedoms, and in the US this means first and foremost the freedom to keep and bear arms.

With the dissolving of the internationalist vision, everybody now belongs to a clan – ethnic or virtual – and everybody is preparing to protect themselves against the coming invasion. After the abandonment of the universalist horizon of enlightened modernity, conflicting subjectivities are now kept together by a faith in belonging.

### Program

Since mental activity is captured by the economy, and the bulk of contemporary work is semiotic, reflection is absorbed and assimilated and reduced to work. In the past, industrial workers were not directly mentally engaged in their tasks. Contemporary semio-workers, however, are obliged to engage their mental faculties in the automated process of production.

Only a break in the submission of cognitarian consciousness to the paradigm of competition can now open a process leading to the autonomous self-organization of cognitive labor. The emancipation of knowledge-force represents the only chance to defeat the neuro-totalitarian system in the making.

The task of the future is to reinvent the process of subjectivation. This reinvention must start from the spreading conditions of mental suffering, and from the discovery of a new level of political action. The concept of a program has long been at the core of political action. In the last century the word "program" referred to an organic ensemble of projects that politics enforced on the social body. Now we should think

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of “program” in terms of social software: an algorithm based on social needs and aimed at social welfare, which should oppose the financial algorithm prevailing today. Only an algorithm for emancipation can replace the present algorithm for financial exploitation.

Programming (in the sense of software for the production process) is the activity particular to cognitive workers. The autonomy of programming practices is the political project that we have to pursue. But we know that the autonomy of practices presupposes the autonomy of the subject.

In the global Silicon Valley, millions of cognitive workers are disseminated worldwide: this is the subjectivity that can subvert financial dictatorship.

We must view the global Silicon Valley in the same way that Lenin viewed the Putilov factory in 1917, and in the same way that the rebels of Italian autonomia viewed the Mirafiori Fiat plant in ‘70s: as the core of the process of production, the place where the maximal level of exploitation is exerted and where the highest transformative potential can be unleashed.

While politics is impotent and nation-states cannot govern the flows of semio-finance, the global Silicon Valley has replaced the governments of the past. However, the global Silicon Valley is not a place without conflict: in this deterritorialized factory, millions of cognitive workers can develop a new form of consciousness and a new social dynamic based on the reduction of labor time, the uncoupling of income from work, and the full implementation of technology and automation.

The challenge is to cultivate this consciousness among cognitive workers: from their mental suffering, an ethical awakening can arise. And in the ethical awakening of millions of engineers, artists, and scientists lies the only possibility of averting a frightening regression, whose contours we glimpse already.

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Zbigniew Brzezinski, “Toward a Global Realignment,” *The American Interest*, vol. 11, no. 6 (July–August 2016)  
<http://www.the-american-interest.com/back-issue-toc/?i=6025>.

2  
Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 361.

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