



The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance

Franco Bifo Berardi

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"The Uprising" is an Autonomist manifesto for today's precarious times, and a rallying cry in the face of the catastrophic and irreversible crisis that neoliberalism and the financial sphere have established over the globe. In his newest book, Franco "Bifo" Berardi argues that the notion of economic recovery is complete mythology. The coming years will inevitably see new surges of protest and violence, but the old models of resistance no longer apply. Society can either stick with the prescriptions and "rescues" that the economic and financial sectors have demanded at the expense of social happiness, culture, and the public good; or it can formulate an alternative. For Berardi, this alternative lies in understanding the current crisis as something more fundamental than an economic crisis: it is a crisis of the social imagination, and demands a new language by which to address it.

This is a manifesto against the idea of growth, and against the concept of debt, the financial sector's two primary linguistic means of manipulating society. It is a call for exhaustion, and for resistance to the cult of energy on which today's economic free-floating market depends. To this end, Berardi introduces an unexpected linguistic political weapon--poetry: poetry as the insolvency of language, as the sensuous birth of meaning and desire, as that which cannot be reduced to information and exchanged like currency. If the protests now stirring about the world are to take shape and direction, then the revolution will be neither peaceful nor violent--it will be linguistic, or will not be at all.

The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance Details

Date : Published October 19th 2012 by Semiotext(e)

ISBN : 9781584351122

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Format : Paperback 173 pages

Genre : Philosophy, Theory, Poetry, Politics, Economics, Nonfiction

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From Reader Review The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance for online ebook

Matt Bernico says

This was a great text. There was more on his thesis from his previous texts "The Soul at Work" and "After the Future" but also a slightly more optimistic outlook towards an activism of poetry.

Kari Barclay says

Great theory about perceptions of time and how attempted acceleration of mental labor affects attention-span and wellbeing. But really shallow understandings of poetry, language, and affect here that never grapple with affective labor. Presenting poetry and "mantra" as the solution to material inequality misses the need for multi-pronged modes of resistance that compel a redistribution of the material world, including of affect.

Mary K says

dear bifo,

i don't think you actually know anything about economics--or poetry, for that matter. and if you do, then you're doing a really bad job proving it. i know literary explication has always been a weak spot for you, which is a shame because you really botched that section on rilke. also, stop yammering about fiat currency and the gold standard. besides being old hat, it makes you seem like you're avoiding any more complicated/rigorous discussions about econ. i'm not mad, i'm just disappointed, and maybe i expected more from you after reading The Soul at Work. oh, and in my edition, you use the wrong "discrete" on page 19. embarrassing!

much love,

mk

Sanja says

For me this honestly was an inspirational reading, but it goes more like to literary texts than to social theory/science. I liked the sense of vanguard this book brings. But it is true not much there is on economy or poetry, quite simplistic narrative. However, I would recommend it since it makes somehow much more sense than many of those highly quoted technicistic articles people used to read, with zero idea beneath.

Will says

A poetic little book, fittingly enough, about the loss of meaning in the financial system. Berardi is a Marxist but does not call for the revolutions of the past. He claims that the solution is to fight back with irony in

order to re-create meaning of community and tangible work. The global awakening will occur by overcoming the strictures of digitization and late capitalism, he says.

It's all a bit Utopic, perhaps, but there are some nicely put ideas and critiques here, sprinkled amongst some French postmodernist philosophy.

Jonfaith says

Everything is crumbling---it's crystal clear.

Read a certain wedge of this at a Bernie Sanders rally in Louisville. The candidate did not inspire me that night. My wife and I had already voted for him that morning. The ideas that Berardi tosses about in this text felt likewise inert. I recognize the idea that theory wants to be sexy, to stir with a poetic flourish. That said, I find the idea that the youth of the West have been stripped of possibility, of a Future -- well, that is just fatuous. This limiting condition or situation has to be situated against the Possibility of the Promise -- the ideological crux of Left or Right is a field where actualization can occur. Summarizing, if anyone has been robbed, they had to have beforehand, in this situation the "having" denotes possibility -- whether that be entrepreneurial or emancipatory. Can serio-capitalism strip such away from the human condition?

Now the glory of the future is over. We no longer trust the future, as the futurists--and the moderns, in general--did.

The arguments were salvaged in the concluding chapters, a point where Benjamin's Mystical Violence is flirted with and just as defiantly Sloterdijk's Kynicism is soundly rejected in favor of the Ironist's pose. **A social movement, at the end of the day, should use irony as semiotic insolvency, as a mechanism of disentangling language, behavior, and action from the limits of the symbolic debt.**

Mohammed Yusuf says

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dan pittman says

Here's the thing: Berardi is right. Despite some Ludditic and misguided fears of the "infosphere" (disclosure: I'm a programmer), which also happens to be in quick succession with some bizarre anti-feminist rhetoric, this book presents an idealistic solution to an insurmountable problem.

The final pages discuss the dichotomy of cynicism and irony, where the cynic is slavishly complacent with What's Wrong while communicating socially the Truth: Capitalism is Bad. The ironist, on the other hand, has repudiated the language of the law and social norms. In Berardi's terms, this is what poetry did with language, to put it in unfamiliar contexts, disassembling the structured bounds of definition and leaving the reader free to interpret meanings, ones which are potentially untainted by prior notions.

It's a beautiful thought. To defeat the violence of financial capitalism through a unified, contemporaneous dismissal of the status quo. Sadly, however, as I see it, cynicism is the only practical truth in today's milieu; reality does not provide for a sea change in perspective. Regrettably, but unequivocally, Cash Rules Everything Around Me.

Sidebar:

This book acts as a fantastic survey into the European philosophical disposition present with Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault, et al. If nothing else, your 'to-read' shelf will grow.

Senia says

Meanders playfully a little, and doesn't in fact give clear examples of some of its ideas but very fun overall.

Chris says

What this small book lacks in argumentative rigor, it more than makes up for in passion and a keen address of what seem to be our cultural plagues today. More a sermon than an argument, really, but I'm not complaining. Its message--that slowing down, reconnecting with sensibility in the body, breathing through the voice are constructive political acts in this climate--is one I'm wholly sympathetic towards. Recommended for anyone who feels overwhelmed, or perhaps underwhelmed too.

Laszlo Szerdahelyi says

Berardi explores the state of the current financial capital system and the new methods of exploitation and abstraction that capital has adapted to and that have lead to a whole new wave of effects on the population at large. His book focuses on semiotics (the use of signs, symbol and communication to create meaning) in the context of an ever more immaterial forms of economic and political oppression and the ways in which we can answer the assault on our "general intellect and social body" and the way in which we can rebel against this.

As the world becomes more and more entangled in the mesh of financial capital (or of what David Harvey calls the "state-financial nexus") created by the aggressive and relentless assault of neo-liberalism through deregulation, privatization and debt we see a new wave of phenomena affecting people and shaping their lives. Abstractization of the essence from our economic and social activities (work from avituity, usefulness from goods, time from sensuousness etc) has lead to a disconnect in the way we go about our lives. It has used digitalization and virtualization (whether the stock market or social media) to achieve this, pushing the world that value inhabits into one that is immaterial and detached from reality or for that matter human desire. Berardi focuses on linkages and the the notion of semio-capital (how capital degrades meaning through semiotics), language has been hijacked and turned into a techno-linguistic intermediary, based on mathematical overrationalization and a language that does not connect to our human needs and wants.

The new world is one of hypercomplexity and hyperacceleration, fueled by an ever more gigantic infosphere while economic life lies stiffly in the hands of a raging, profit hungry market that disregards any kinds of human emotion and sensibility while removing value from reality. We are assailed by a vast amount of information and as such our interactions are streamlined and simplified so as to be easier to understand, we are moulded more and more into a hive-mind or a swarm that acts as a mindless collective. Technology is used as a medium of control of the techo-linguistic system, Berardi affirms that future generations are beginning to be taught languages and words not by our human mothers, but by machines as we are ever more exposed and in proximity to them.

Berardi sees this assault as a next level of alienation in capitalism, if in the industrial period physical work was the one alienated, cognitive work has now become the focal point of exploitation and alienation and it is cognitive work that is degraded and made precarious this time round. He sees that the effects of a streamlined, mechanized world where our social communication and our ability to connect to one another, to solidarize and have empathy have numbed out and stomped out of focus. As this trend continues and as economics have moved into the virtual, immaterial world where value can be manipulated by speculators and where the sharpest tool of neoliberalism, debt, can wreak havoc. Using the example of the European countries afflicted by the debt crisis (Portugal, Greece, Ireland) he shows the absurdity of a people toiling away to pay off an invisible debt that they themselves have not accrued. Banks no longer hold value but our future monetized, the future of all the exploited people of IMF and ECB assaulted countries. In accumulating value, financial capital is infinite, as it is not tied down by physical and material limitations it forecasts an infinity of accumulation. However, as we see this in the growing inequality of the world and the destruction of nature, this is potentially spelling disaster.

His solution, exploring the works of Deleuze, Guattari and Baudrillard, is that of poetry, he sees poetry as the dimension of non-exchangability and infinity, that addresses our desires and creates a sense of autonomy and self-governance. The essence of this idea is to extract the fundamentals of how poetry functions and to apply in the construction of meaningful interactions with other people. The final goal being the reconstruction of the general intellect and the social body of people through communication and language

that reflects more the world of humans than that of capital.

Furthermore he expands on the notion of irony(unconnected to cynicism) as a tool for resistance against this streamlined method of techno-linguistics. This last point being perhaps his works greatest shortcoming, using the postmodernist technique of irony. Although it is effective in revealing the truth of our connections, it is doomed to fail by nature of it's limitations, yes, it shows the absurdity of the world but it stops there and is devoid of any redeeming qualities.

Malcolm says

One of the most difficult challenges the left has had to grapple with as finance capital has gained its foothold and then descended into crisis is that many of our key analytical concepts have proved wanting. Perhaps the most difficult of these challenges has been that posed by 'value' – how, in the world of finance capital, is it made and how does it relate to the material conditions of life? The labour theory of value, the basis of conventional left including Marxist approaches to value holds that the value of a good, of an economic product, is based in the labour time that went into its production – a widget takes X-hours to produce, so value added by its production (the conversion of raw materials into the widget) is the cost of X-hours average labour; in the conventional Marxist approach, capitalist wealth production comes about when the good is sold for more than the cost of its production – and by this means the capitalist extracts more (surplus) value than workers add through their labour power. The problem for the left is that finance capitalism doesn't work that way – it doesn't produce stuff/material goods, but produces more finance; the abstract thing that is money interacts with other abstract money to produce more wealth; industrial capitalism produces value (abstracted as money/profit) from the abstract labour of workers; finance capital produces value from itself, from the circulation of money isolated from the material world of labour and stuff.

This problem of immaterial value production is not new (the challenges posed by finance capital can be seen, for instance, in Marxist analyses such as Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917) and *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899) as well as left-liberal work from the same era, the first two decades of the 20th century, such as Hobson's *Imperialism* (1904), which itself had a deep influence on Lenin), but in the current political conjuncture it takes on a hue because of the emergence of what some analysts, including Berardi, call semio-capitalism – a capitalism whose principle product is signs. In this case, semio-capitalism acts like industrial capitalism – things are produced by workers' labour – but like finance capitalism these things are immaterial (of course, there is still a whole bunch of stuff being made – our clothes, our food, our cars & phones – to carry the signification semio-capitalism requires, but there is also a whole bunch of immaterial stuff being produced – ideas and the like). The problem with semio-capitalism is the there is no abstract 'average labour time' for the production of a sign, unlike clothes, food, cars & phones. As a result, we've seen a profound change between labour and capital and a generalisation of labour precarity, although for different reasons in industrial capitalism making our stuff and semio-capitalism making our signs; there is sharp insight to this conjunction in Andrea Fumagalli and Sandro Mezzadra's collection *Crisis in the Global Economy: Financial Markets, Social Struggles and New Political Scenarios* .

The current crisis brings together a crisis of financial capitalism with its very real effects and the precarity of semio-capitalism's workers to produce the uprising we are seeing against the business-as-usual neo-liberal world that is events as diverse as Occupy, the rebellions in Rio, the siege of Gezi Square, the 'Arab Spring' and elsewhere. Berardi, in this short and provocative set of essays, brings these factors together in an effort to make sense of the responses to the crisis as well as theorise this conjunction of crises in industrial, financial and semio-capitalisms. I'm not sure that it works as well as it could, but then that is often the case

with early analyses – the essays were written in 2011 as the uprising was in its early days and the European neo-liberal response still finding its feet. At the core of his exploration of this problem is a paradox (noted also by others) that “capitalism has never been so close to its final collapse [that was optimistic] but social solidarity has never been so far from our daily experience” (p59); this is the effect of Thatcher’s and other neo-liberal’s proclamation that there is no such thing as society.

Alongside this problem of social relations, Berardi identifies two new aspects of the current capitalist condition that we need to comprehend. The convention left approach, identified by Marx, is the abstraction-in-capitalism of value from usefulness and productive labour from concrete human activity (quite a lot of *Capital* explains this). His case is that the current capitalist conjuncture relies on two further layers of abstraction where production is not based in the world of bodies and physical manipulation of stuff but in “interoperativity between informational machines” (p104) so that information replaces things. The third layer of abstraction is the generalisation of the one noted above – where the process of value creation no longer passes through use value but merely the circulation of money.

This is where the poetry comes in – as abstract, excessive language poetry provides a metaphor to discuss the abstractions of financial and semio-capitalisms. But it also provides a way into the critical comprehension of sensibility that semio-capitalism turns on and therefore the language to critique the capitalisation of language. This takes Berardi into a discussion of Wittgenstein but more importantly of Sloterdijk’s work on cynicism and irony, leading to an argument that mass cynicism (as opposed to Platonic cynicism) is complicit with Power whereas irony rejects the meanings imposed by Power and therefore opens up possibilities. The problem here is that the discussion of poetry is the least well developed element of the argument – which is not surprising; many on the left, and Berardi seems no different from many of the rest of us in this regard, are much better at analysis than we are at developing a path out of the current condition.

This text, then, is of its time; the opening chapter is a sharp autonomist-inspired analysis of the European uprising in late 2011. The body of the text – the second two essays – insightful analyses of the semio-capitalism and its links to and connections with industrial and financial capitalism providing useful extensions of convention left political economy understandings of the emerging generalised condition of precarity. The final essay, the one on poetry, looks like the beginnings of an intriguing pathway to action, or at least the basis of a way to better understand how to develop that way out of the circumstances we find ourselves in. We should not write this off; it is designed as an intervention into on-going debates (the publishers, semiotext(e) even label this part of their ‘intervention series’) and should therefore be used as a way to sharpen our understandings and analyses, to frame our explorations of work in contemporary capitalism, to consider carefully the labour process of production in semio-capitalism and what that tells us about the politics of struggle (including who and what we’re struggling against as well as what we’re struggling for) in the new economic circumstances of increasingly widespread immaterial labour and the expansion of value without usefulness.

There are parts of this I’ll be drawn back to in my work, especially the third essay, and I look forward to Berardi’s on-going work to bring these ideas into more coherent whole; at present the ideas are more compelling than coherent.

Peter says

some parts of this book were better than other parts of this book. there are some really interesting aphorisms than can be plucked away from a sea of incorrect predictions written during 2011. I could praise the bits that

came true as being brilliant foresight, but doing so is like listening to one of my tarot readings and being like “see?! that one ambiguous thing I said about power came true!!”

cultural critics should really be cautious writing about the present. some of us get to be Susan Sontag, while others of us are doomed to be Francis Fukuyama.

this book would have strongly benefited from a more nuanced discussion of poetry rather than speaking about it in the most abstract way possible!

Mihai Barbat says

I discovered Franco "Bifo" Berardi a few weeks ago, when he's almost 70. Gee! Better late than never.

This is a beautiful yellow little book. I read it in about 3 hours, as a sort of post-Christmas ritual of disconnection.

Although published in 2012 the book is still actual. Franco Berardi builds up in that typical italian fashion a very passionate case (with its many repetitions and non-linearities) for a collective awakening in this post-crisis situation we still find ourselves in.

The key of this book is its title: On poetry and finance, and delivers the only concrete solution for resistance and change that I could extract from all my marxist readings so far.

To break out of the capitalist mindset one has to first break out of the limits of language, as how Wittgenstein taught us, these are also the limits of our world.

"Digital financial capitalism has created a closed reality which cannot be overcome with the techniques of politics, of conscious organized voluntary action, and of government. The way out of this prison can only be found through an act of language. Language has an infinite potency but it's exercised in the finite conditions of history and existence. Thanks to the establishment of a limit, the world comes into existence as a world of language. Grammar, logic, and ethics are based on the institution of a limit. But infinity remains unmeasurable. Poetry is the reopening of the indefinite, the ironic act of exceeding the established meaning of words. As language today is defined and limited by its economic exchangeability, it's transformed to information, an incorporation of techno-linguistic automatisms. But poetry is language's excess, to use the structuralist perspective, its signifier is disentangled from the limits of its signified."

Wow! So beautifully put by Franco Berardi.

But he doesn't stop here and executes a perfect coup de foudre and he brings in Peter Sloterdijk's dichotomy between kynismus and zynismus!

"Kynismus being the ascetic way through which Diogenes and his fellow rejected the acquiescence to the law of the powerful and zynismus being the state in which the conformist majority, fully aware that the law of the majority is bad, still bend to it because there's nothing else to do."

"Zynismus is not disruptive. It's only an internalization of the impotence of truth which is born out of the failure of the 20-th century utopian ideologies and the perception that exploitation of labour, competition and

war are inevitable and irreversible (capitalism). Mass cynicism results from the dissolution of social solidarity and the systemic precariousness of the labour market results from the neoliberal deregulation that imposed competition as the inescapable, generalized mode of relation among people."

Poetry, seen as an ironic act thus "...suspends the semantic value of the signifier and chooses freely among a thousand possible interpretations. Cynicism starts from the same suspension, but is a slavish modulation of irony: irony at the service of power. While irony does not postulate the existence of any reality, cynicism postulates the inescapable reality of power, particularly the power of the economy...the cynical mood starts from the idea that ethical action has no possibility of succeeding. The ironist sleeps happily because nothing can awake her from her dreams. The cynicist sleeps a light sleep, he dreams nightmares, and he gets up as soon as power calls him"

At the end, as an antidote to cynicism, Franco Berardi doesn't propose passion, but irony through poetry. This is the only avenue we have to expand our language and thus the limits of our world.

José Arturo says

This book is pure feeling. But it's reiterative. And if you read other of his material it becomes redundant. Nevertheless, the goal is sincere and powerful: to wake us from the direction the world is heading. I was waiting for a deepening in the poetry argument, but is rather abstract and mostly about finance speculation, than poetry. He just says poetry can be a way of re-erotizing life, now that is precarious, but does not explain why. I would have liked some data. Not one of his best books, but a great one to drive into other ways of seeing the present. A good introductory book to Bifo's work.
