

## Irony and the Politics of Composition in the Philosophy of Franco “Bifo” Berardi

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### Abstract

By analyzing Franco Berardi’s reflections on irony as an extension of his political praxis, the article first examines the multifaceted functions of this rhetorical device in the contexts of the late-1960s social struggles against factory work in Italy, the communication experiments of the Autonomia movement, and the information overload of the contemporary mediascape. In the second part, the text addresses Berardi’s attempt to reconcile Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theory of desire to end with a reflection on how his distinction between irony and cynicism may offer a counterpoint to Slavoj Žižek’s critique of ideology.

### Keywords

Irony; class composition; Italian workerism; social movements; subjectivity; autonomy.

Born in Bologna in 1949, Franco “Bifo” Berardi has participated in four major anti-capitalist movements in the past four decades: the 1968 as a member of the Marxist revolutionary group Potere Operaio (Workers’ Power); the movement of Autonomia in 1977; the alter-globalization movement in the late 1990s-early 2000s; and the current European movement against austerity measures, the precarization of labor conditions, and the budget cuts to public education. Berardi has combined this personal engagement with an ongoing experimentation with social movement media such as the magazine *A/Traverso*, the experimental community radio Radio Alice, both founded in Bologna in the mid-1970s. In the late 1990s, he launched the e-mail list *Rekombinant* and, in the early 2000s, the community TV Orfeo TV. The latter sparked *Telestreet*, a national movement of micro-pirate TV stations that claimed to counter the media monopoly of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. More recently, Berardi has launched the web journal *Through Europe* and the European School of Social Imagination in San Marino.<sup>1</sup>

Berardi has accompanied this tireless activity with an equally intense theoretical elaboration on a variety of themes including the question of the political organization of cognitive labor; the link between the refusal of work, the pursuit of autonomy, and the re-appropriation of daily life; the irreducibility of the human body to the imperatives of economic discipline, industrial automation, and digital connectivity; the devastating impact of the contemporary acceleration of info-stimuli on the human psyche and consciousness; the political significance of suicide, depression, anxiety, bipolar disorders, and panic attacks; and the relationship between the rise of the financial economy, the precarization of labor, and the aggressive resurgence of national, ethnic, and religious identities.

These and several other themes run through a prolific literary production encompassing over thirty books and countless articles published in Italian over the course of four decades. Only recently a small but significant portion of this literature has been translated into English thanks to the publication of five volumes: *Félix Guattari: Thought, Friendship, and Visionary Cartography* (2008), *Precarious Rhapsody* (2009a), *The Soul at Work* (2009b), *Ethereal Shadows* (co-authored with Marco Jacquemet and Gianfranco Vitali, 2009), and *After the Future* (2011a). In the present article I address Berardi’s intellectual trajectory as strictly intertwined with his political experience. In the 1970s, while he was in exile in Paris, Berardi developed a personal friendship with French philosopher Félix Guattari and became a liaison between prominent French intellectuals and the Italian movement of Autonomia in 1977.<sup>2</sup> Further, as we shall see, Berardi has tried to offer an original reading of the social movements he

has been involved with by bridging the gap between two seemingly incompatible strands of post-structuralism: Deleuze and Guattari's theory of desire and Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra.

### Potere Operaio between Compositional Analysis and the Leninist Turn

In sketching Berardi's intellectual and political trajectory, I shall begin from the foundational experience of Potere Operaio, a Marxist revolutionary group Berardi joined in 1967 and that saw the participation of public intellectuals such as Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno, Sergio Bologna, Paolo Mieli, and Massimo Cacciari, among others. Although Potere Operaio was by no means the largest Italian revolutionary group in the late 1960s, its leadership relied on a sophisticated analysis of class composition that had been developed throughout the 1960s by young dissidents in the PCI and the Socialist Party. Sparked by the Italian translation of Marx's *Grundrisse*, such analysis unfolded on the journals *Quaderni Rossi* (Red Notes) and *Classe Operaia* (Working Class) through the contributions of researchers and intellectuals such as Raniero Panzieri, Mario Tronti, Antonio Negri, Romano Alquati, and Alberto Asor Rosa, among others.

The main research focus of these journals was the economic and political centrality of a new social subject: the mass worker (*operaio massa*). A byproduct of the delayed introduction of the Taylorist organization of labor in the Italian factories in the 1940s and 1950s, the deskilled mass worker had little in common with the skilled manual worker (*operaio professionale*) who had been analyzed and instigated by Gramsci on the journal *L'Ordine Nuovo* (The New Order) in the Two Red Years of 1919-20. If the manual worker had had a comprehensive knowledge of his trade and was proud of his profession, the "rude pagan race" of mass workers, as Tronti described them, hated their own condition and profession. Such hatred expressed itself through spontaneous revolts and strikes that the traditional organizations of the working class had a hard time to decode and direct. As we shall see, these revolts marked a decisive break with the socialist and communist work ethic epitomized by the Stalinist myth of Stakhanov. This subjective *refusal of work* was the empirical foundation upon which Italian workerism developed its analysis of class composition, which was articulated along three theoretical axes of inquiry and political initiative.

First, building upon Marx's argument on the general intellect as a driving force of production (1973: 690-712), the workerists argued that the workers' consciousness and the social composition of the class determine and anticipate capitalist restructuring processes—capital's technological and political responses to the workers' struggles. As Alberto Toscano (2009) has aptly noted, Tronti's famous "Copernican revolution" of the Marxian method posited that "the economic laws of the movement of capitalist society must be newly discovered as the political laws of the movement of the working class" and "bent with subjective force of organization brutally to serve the objective revolutionary needs of antagonism and struggle" (Tronti cited in Toscano, 117).<sup>3</sup>

Second, the primacy of living labor and class struggle over capital implies on the one hand that the organization of the working class cannot be external to the processes of class composition that take place within the factory and the factory-society. On the other hand, because the composition of living labor is a subjective movement that preempts capital it should be organized and directed against capital without waiting for the materialization of historically necessary conditions. As Berardi notes, Tronti's analysis and the ensuing political trajectory of Potere Operaio "oscillates between the exaltation of the workers' political spontaneism and a voluntaristic-subjectivist emphasis on the function of the vanguard party" (1998: 80).<sup>4</sup>

Third, the workerists' emphasis on the immanent and immediately political character of the social composition of the class means that the spheres of the economy, society and politics are increasingly indistinguishable. Thus the workerists see the wage not only as that part of value the capitalist has to pay

in order to guarantee the reproduction of the workforce but as a *political weapon* the workers can use to recompose their unity. Hence Workers Power's "impossible demand" of an equal salary for all workers—a demand first advanced by Potere Operaio in 1967, which becomes the demand of all factory workers in the Hot Fall of 1969.

As Berardi notes in *La Nefasta Utopia di Potere Operaio* (The Nefarious Utopia of Potere Operaio) Potere Operaio extends the compositional analysis to the student movements, whose demands are not seen in a Sartrean or Marcusean framework, that is, as a moral, humanistic revolt against the consumer society. Rather, the May 1968 is read by Potere Operaio as a direct manifestation of the proletarianization of the student body (1998: 97). If until the 1960s access to higher education was a bourgeois prerogative, the 1968 marks a turning point at which the students who are entering en masse public universities begin to perceive themselves as labor-power in becoming. While PCI intellectuals such as Pier Paolo Pasolini and most Marxist-Leninist revolutionary groups saw the students as middle class and were skeptical of their demands, the originality of Potere Operaio's analysis lies for Berardi in its capacity to link the "socially determined character of the student movement" to the social composition and struggles of the working class (97). Such an analysis, argues Berardi, leaves little room to the Marxist-Leninist notion that the students are a marginal figure in the revolutionary process and as such should be subordinated to the hegemony of the working class through their participation to a party of revolutionary cadres (97-100).

This approach, however, changes dramatically in 1970 as the unions regain ground and are able to secure new contracts and the conversion into law of the Statute of Workers, a significant piece of labor legislation that protects workers' rights. Taken by surprise by the reformist counter-offensive, Potere Operaio's leading group opts for a Leninist turn that privileges the strategic role of political organization over the processes of social composition.<sup>5</sup> To the Leninist turn, Berardi reacts by leaving the organization in 1971. Remaining faithful to what he calls the "compositionist method," Berardi argues that in 1970 the question was no longer how to direct a proto-industrial working class such as the one organized by Lenin in 1917. Rather, the Italian working class of the late-1960s-early-1970s had already matured an organizational autonomy, a language, and imagination that were much more diversified and hybrid than those elaborated within the tradition of organized industrial labor. Such hybridization emerges for Berardi from three interrelated factors.

First, the 1968 student movement, with its anti-authoritarian and libertarian culture, is the first conscious manifestation of the post-industrial workforce that we now describe as socialized cognitive labor. If Gramsci's organic intellectuals could not access the dimension of collective and political participation without the indispensable mediation of the party, the 1968 marks for Berardi the passage at which intellectuals understand themselves as a mass social and political subject as they become more and more integrated in the general productive process (Berardi, 2009a: 63). Second, the proliferation of the *groupuscules* of the extra-parliamentary Left is not so much important for their ideological positions but rather for their ability to build networks of solidarity, contestation, and participation in the multiple articulations of the social fabric. Third, this *experiential refusal* of a life subjected to the economic imperatives of labor and competition is also manifest in the social composition and subjectivity of factory workers. In particular, the massive internal migration from Southern Italy to Northern Italy in the 1950s and 1960s had determined the formation of a new stratum of "metropolitan proletarians" that having been uprooted from their towns and villages in the South did no longer identify with "a local community and with the network of compromises that a territorial belonging implies" (Berardi, 1998: 89).

### The Estranged, Ironic Mass Worker

The estrangement of the Southern mass worker is the subject of Nanni Balestrini's novel *We Want Everything*. Perhaps the most important work of fiction on the Italian 1968, *We Want Everything* is a first-person, nearly unpunctuated oral account of a young factory worker who migrates from the Southern city

of Salerno to Turin, home to the FIAT car company and a booming industrial district. Here he comes into contact with a metropolitan life that lights his imagination because of the unexpected encounters it makes possible:

The following night I met a junkie who wanted the key to go sleep she was calling a friend of her from downstairs in the hostel. I went downstairs and there she was drugged I began to kiss her. She said But what do you want to fuck me I don't want. And this world looked so strange to me I liked this way of living that had nothing to do with the factory the countryside the religion. It was a world entirely detached from what I knew and that I liked. And I kept myself open to all new experiences even though I eventually ended up at the movies [by myself]. Or it ended that I was playing the parrot in the sense that I tried to pick up foreigners on the street or girls in dance bars (Balestrini, 2004: 48-49).<sup>6</sup>

As the protagonist keeps passing from one factory job to another, he realizes that while money are indispensable to enjoy life in a big city, the work at the assembly line is too hard and underpaid to make this other imagined life possible—let alone real.<sup>7</sup> Even though eventually the worker finds a new sense of belonging and solidarity in the mass strikes that take over the FIAT car plants in the Hot Fall of 1969, this new subjectivity is not associated in any possible way with his profession. On the contrary:

We want less work more money we write in big letters on the leaflet we are preparing to hand out at the gates tomorrow.

And finally there I had the satisfaction of discovering that the things I had thought for years since I had begun working were the same things we all thought. And that we were all really the same thing. What difference there was between another worker and myself? What difference there could have possibly been? That perhaps he was heavier taller or shorter he had a dress of one color or another I don't know.

But the thing that made no difference was our will our logic our discovery that work is the only enemy the only disease. It was the hatred we all had for work and for the bosses (*padroni*) that forced us to work. It was for this that we were all angry (*incazzati*) that we pretended to be sick even when we did not strike. To avoid that prison wherein they took away our freedom and our forces every day (102).

The movement of refusal of labor is a movement of a new generation of workers who no longer identify with the ethos of factory work as they feel estranged from both the working place and the historic organizations of the working class. Estranged, not alienated. Berardi aptly points out that in the workerist-compositionist analysis of the late 1960s, and in particular on the journal *Classe Operaia* directed by Tronti, “the word ‘estrangement’ replaces ‘alienation,’ which inevitably alludes to a previous human essence, lost in the historical process, waiting for a synthesis capable of reestablishing it, of calling it into being as a positivity” (2009b: 45). If in classic Marxist terms, the factory worker overcomes his alienation by appropriating the means of production, the estranged worker is someone who rejects the entire disciplinary apparatus that underpins the industrial organization of labor. This apparatus includes the unions as well as the party, which is supposed to extend the power of organized labor to the management of society. To a democratically managed factory, the estranged worker prefers a world without factories or where factory work has been entirely automated. To the rational and responsible demands of the unions, the estranged worker prefers unreasonable demands such as “More Income, Less Work.”

Berardi maintains that this estrangement from the proletarian identity—what Nicholas Thoburn (2003: 111) has described as “the refusal of any plenitude or subject in work”—renders the subjectivity of Italian factory workers of the 1960s and 1970s more akin to the Wobblies and the countercultural youth groups of the time than to the socialist tradition that celebrates labor as the source of all wealth. Such

estrangement, argues Berardi, manifested itself through a language and sensibility that were ironic in character. It is Berardi himself to recount an episode from the occupation of FIAT Mirafiori which well captures the carnivalesque irreverence that permeates the new forms of struggle of the 1970s:

The occupation of Mirafiori was for me an exhilarating experience. I participated to internal rallies because I knew some workers who were friends of mine. Paradoxically my first encounter with recreational drugs was during the occupation of Mirafiori in Turin, that is, I discovered—because these young men were telling me—that inside the FIAT compartments people smoked joints. Because I came from the notion that drugs are a danger to the integrity of the proletariat, I discovered all of a sudden that they were instead a means to slow down the pace of production, and so on. Thus I experienced the occupation of Mirafiori as a sort of explosion of behaviors that were not at all Bolshevik but quite hippy—an anticipation of the 1977. When I hear people talking about the Metropolitan Indians in 1977 I always think that I met the first metropolitan indians in Turin in 1973. [These guys] crowned their heads with red laces, staged rallies in which nobody shouted meaningful slogans, they said the most absurd things, went around carrying drums, etc. I was impressed by the sight of a huge courtyard in which there were 5,000 cars ready for testing the workers went and taped the honks so that after a while you had 5,000 cars that howled like crazy while the rally marched around them. It was an infernal circle of sorts but at the same time completely joyous, with an absurd and happy sense of participation that I discovered later between 1975 and 1977 here [in Bologna], Milan, and so on. All that not in the least bit Bolshevik, twentieth-century-like, historic and serious energy I already perceived it in the occupation of Mirafiori. (Berardi, in *Gli Operaisti*, 85).

If ironic distancing is the existential attitude of the estranged mass worker portrayed in the first part of *We Want Everything*—a worker who does not commit to anything other than his own desire to live and feel alive—in the passage cited above we encounter a second acceptance of irony. As Linda Hutcheon (1994) has shown, irony can have multiple, even contradictory functions. On the one hand, irony can be employed as a distancing, demystifying, and oppositional rhetorical device to undermine and subvert the order of the discourse (Foucault, 1972). On the other hand, Hutcheon notes that a discursive community can adopt an ironic mode of communication to reinforce bonds within the “in-group” while excluding those who do not belong or at which the irony is directed. In the playful cacophony of the internal rally at Mirafiori we can recognize this second aggregative and inclusionary function of irony—one that prefigures the inventive communicative practices against and within the productive regimes of the social factory in the late 1970s.

I will return on this point in the following section. For now, I shall pause on a third possible way of understanding the function of irony in relation to the process of class composition. Berardi argues that while the official language of Potere Operaio (PO) was Leninist and “organizationist” (*organizzativista*) the vast majority of the workerists experienced their daily practices and subjectivity as spontaneist. In other words, there existed a gap between the language and behavior adopted by the militants during the national meetings and in their line of conduct at a local level:

... I had a certain number of friends, generally of the PO area, more or less militant, but all with a very free relationship [with PO] on the organizational level, who intervened in the factories or worked in the factories from time to time, with a general political affiliation to the organization, even a militant relationship, but very ironic: “Yes of course on Friday I attend the party meeting and I pretend to be a party militant, but in actual fact I am an anarchist agitator.” This libertarian, spontaneist element of self-identification has always been for me the strongest distinctive mark of the workerist militant; and the

organizational Leninist form was in some way superimposed to this kind of identity. (Berardi, In *Gli Operaisti*, 82).

One may be tempted to read this form of militancy as ambiguous, contradictory, not fully resolved. In fact, the ironic attitude of the PO militants enables them to code-switch and circulate between different contexts such as student meetings and factory meetings without having to reduce their language to a monolithic line or code of conduct. As Hutcheon acutely notes, it is not irony to create a relationship between the ironist and the interpreter. On the contrary, irony stems from the stratified character of a discursive community. “We all belong to many overlapping (and sometimes even conflicting) communities or collectives,” writes Hutcheon. “This overlapping is the condition that makes irony possible, even though the sharing will always be partial, incomplete, fragmentary; nevertheless, something does manage to get shared—enough, that is, to make irony happen” (92).

From this angle, it should be clear why Berardi sees the primary function of a revolutionary formation such as PO as that of fostering the process of class composition by facilitating the circulation of ideas and militants among different contexts. Such compositional process does not aim at reaching a synthesis, a unitary position that would be adopted and mirrored by all the branches of the organization. Rather, Berardi’s view of the organization does not depart from what Deleuze and Guattari call an assemblage of enunciation. In an assemblage, write Deleuze and Guattari, “the whole not only coexists with all the parts; it is contiguous to them, it exists as a product that is produced apart from them and yet at the same time is related to them” (1983: 42-43). Thus while a more or less structured organization can provide a framework and a network for different ideas and practices to circulate and move up from a local to a national and possibly international context, the theoretical and political syntheses that are operated at a higher level cannot be easily redeployed in local realities. And this is not only because theory operates at a different velocity than practice and abstract thought cannot be simply adopted and executed by an assemblage of bodies. But also because every synthesis produces a division or disjunction that cuts through the assemblage. “We believe only in totalities that are peripheral,” write Deleuze and Guattari (42). Likewise, for Berardi and the other militants that migrated from PO and other revolutionary groups to the diffuse galaxy of collectives in the mid-1970s, the Leninist hypothesis was only *one disjunctive synthesis among many—a totality that at best could coexist side by side with several other revolutionary hypotheses*.

The so-called “crisis of militancy” that coincides with the rise of feminism and Autonomia in the mid-1970s, the eclipse of the centrality of the industrial working class to the revolutionary process, and the decomposition of the Marxist-Leninist formations that had ridden on the cycle of struggles from 1968 to 1973, marks a qualitative mutation in the processes of class composition. As the disjunctive syntheses that had cut across the Marxist-Leninist groups begun to float *alongside* myriad practices and subjectivities, new conjunctive syntheses among disjunctions began to emerge. As we shall see in the next section, for Berardi and a small circle of accomplices the production of new compositional processes initiated with a reflection on the relationship between the movement and the changing function of media in a post-Fordist society. In this new configuration, irony had to come to play, once again, a central role.

#### False Information Produce Real Events

The occupation of Mirafiori in 1973 marked the last offensive of the Italian working class in the twentieth century. As the decentralization of production and the oil shocks put factory workers on the defensive, women, students, and the unemployed took center stage within the movement. The new composition associated with the crisis of militancy is not only a fatal blow to the ethos of personal commitment and sacrifice that was constitutive to the PCI and the M-L revolutionary groups, but marks also a shift in the expectations of social movements. In particular, the rebellious and inventive practices of the non-guaranteed are characterized by a desire to *change the everyday*, rather than deferring change to a mythic

post-revolutionary time. As revolutionary expectations wither away, and with them the epistemic paradigm of modernity, the movement of Autonomia, writes Berardi, “anticipates a tendency inscribed in the development of productive forces, that is, the tendency towards the liberation of cultural, consumerist, and existential expectations and energies from the cage of the general interest.” (In Bianchi e Caminiti, 43) In such context, irony plays a crucial role in decoupling activism from the imagined needs of the masses and in refocusing it on concrete issues that concern the daily lives of the new metropolitan subjectivities.

This is particularly clear if we analyze the language of the Proletarian Youth Circles, the Metropolitan Indians, the Mao-Dadaists, the free radios, the urban communes, and festivals organized by the countercultural network of the magazine *Re Nudo*. The so-called creative fringes of the 1977 movement frequently produce pranks, parodies, fakes, and guerrilla-theater interventions as they seek to reinvent languages and forms of political participation. For instance, the Metropolitan Indians staged happenings and guerrilla-theater actions, called for demonstrations without attending them, borrowed metaphors from an imagined Far West, and satirized the serious political lingo not only of the government and the PCI, but also of the Red Brigades and the more militant collectives of Autonomia (Mariani, 1999). When the secretary of the CGIL Luciano Lama tried to deliver a speech at the University La Sapienza of Rome in February 1977 to explain the austerity measures backed by his union and the PCI, the Metropolitan Indians contested him by shouting ironic slogans such as “More Work, Less Salary,” “More Sacrifices,” “More Shacks, Less Homes,” “Power to the Bosses,” “We Want More Police,” and so forth.

The creation of fake posters and newspapers was also a diffused practice. At the end of 1976, the walls of Bologna buildings were plastered with thousands of fake poster ads of the local newspaper *Il Resto del Carlino* (Collettivo A/Traverso 2002). A similar experiment was repeated, on a much wider scale, in Rome in 1978. For a few months the satirical magazine *Il Male* printed and distributed hundreds of thousands of fake copies of national Italian dailies. The fake special editions announced (and sometimes anticipated) dramatic and historic events such as the end of the historic compromise between the PCI and the DC, the annulment of the 1978 final of the World Cup, the arrest of comic actor Ugo Tognazzi as head of the Red Brigades, and the extinction of the State (Vincino 2007).

The Bolognese experiments in guerrilla-communication were coordinated by the magazine *A/Traverso* and the pirate radio Radio Alice, which were managed by two collectives both co-founded by Berardi. Radio Alice’s programming included political discussions and reports from rallies, phone-ins, avant-garde poetry, Mao-Dadaist rants, sci-fi tales, protest songs, early punk rock from London, yoga classes, cooking recipes, children fairy-tales, and so forth. By making a continuous and unprecedented usage of the open microphone and live broadcasts, Radio Alice allowed listeners to express themselves in an unrestrained manner. This spontaneous, participatory spirit was coupled with a sophisticated analysis of how power manipulate the media and authoritative language for self-legitimation.

Berardi often notes that the Bolognese media activists had read and discussed *For a Socialist Strategy of Media* (Per Una Strategia Socialista dell’Informazione), a volume published in 1973 that juxtaposed Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s “Constituents of a Theory of the Media” to Jean Baudrillard’s “Requiem for the Media.” In the first essay, the German philosopher advanced a classic Marxist argument by noting that contemporary capitalism could not develop “the consciousness-shaping industry” (the media and the culture industry) without at the same time putting fetters on its expansion. “A socialist theory of media has to work on this contradiction,” argued Enzensberger (1982: 47), emphasizing the need of shifting away from the centralized broadcast model to a network-based media system driven by social antagonism and emancipatory struggles.

In “Requiem for the Media”—a chapter of *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*—Baudrillard refuted Enzensberger’s theories by arguing that the battle for the democratization of the media

was pointless, given their inherently “anti-mediatory and intransitive” nature. According to Baudrillard, the centralized architecture of the media “founds itself on the latter definition: *they are always what prevents response*, making all the processes of exchange impossible (except in the various forms of response *simulation*, themselves integrated in the transmission process, thus leaving the unilateral nature of the communication intact)” (170). It follows that resistance to a media system that prevents communication—and is thus consubstantial with power—should not consist in the dialectical restoration of the truth, the democratization or subversion of content, nor even the possibility for everyone to become a transmitter (Baudrillard calls this “the cybernetic illusion”). Rather the simulated model of communication engendered by contemporary media can be confronted only through a nihilistic strategy of refusal to signify—a strategy of “symbolic death,” as Baudrillard will define (1976) it shortly thereafter.

Drawing on Baudrillard, Berardi maintains that *A/Traverso*, Radio Alice, and other creative groups of Autonomia deployed a strategy of symbolic disorder—a strategy the French philosopher had described as a Pataphysical science of “imaginary solutions” characterized by the formulation of nonsensical and tautological arguments, the lack of demands, even of a rational subject of enunciation (Baudrillard, 1976: 4). Such strategy was clearly articulated in a text titled “False information may produce real events” published by *A/traverso* in 1976. Co-authored by Berardi and other members of the collective, the article conflated a critique of counter-information with a critique of the authoritarian policy emerging from the historic compromise between the PCI and the DC (here labeled as “the discourse of order”):

Counterinformation has denounced the false power produces, everywhere the mirror of power’s language reflects reality in a distorted fashion. Counterinformation re-establishes what is true, but in a purely reflexive manner. Acting like a mirror. Radio Alice is language beyond the mirror. It has built a space in which the subject does not recognize himself as in a mirror, as restored truth, as fixed reproduction, but as the practice of an existence in becoming. And language is one of the levels whereby life is transformed. It is not enough to denounce power’s lies, it is also necessary to denounce and break power’s truth. When power says the truth and pretends it is natural, we must denounce what is inhuman and absurd in this order of reality that the order of the discourse reproduces, reflects, and consolidates. Unveiling the delirious nature of power. *It is necessary to take the place of (self-validating) power, and speaking with its voice.* Emitting signs with the voice and tone of power. False signs. We produce false information which expose what power hides, and which produce revolt against the force of the discourse of order. (Collettivo A/traverso 2002: 59).

By criticizing the tendency of the old and the New Left to focus on meaning and the dialectical restoration of truth rather than on a thorough analysis of how truth is produced by power, the Metropolitan Indians, the Transversalists, and Radio Alice appropriated and subjected to parody the language of institutional politics, orthodox Marxism, as well as the ossified rituals of the revolutionary groups—with their obsession on proselytizing, elaborating lists of demands, and their subterfuges and tactics to hegemonize the movement. As Thoburn (2003) points out, this linguistic deterritorialization emerged out of the cramped political space of institutional *and* extra-parliamentary politics to engage intensively with the movement’s concerns—namely, the refusal of work and the re-appropriation of daily life. If the workerists and the autonomists attacked the socialist ideology of labor and the fullness of a proletarian identity, the creative wing of the movement extended this critique to the sphere of communication by refusing to speak a meaningful language—at least in traditional political terms.

To be sure, such language was perfectly meaningful within the movement’s everyday life. As Thoburn notes, “with the ‘circles of proletarian youth’ as its particular focus, Radio Alice sought to open the cramped spaces of home, work, the family, sexism, and individualizing relationships, to make language

intensive, ‘unproductive’, tactile, and ‘political’, and to draw out, as they put it, the ‘unstated’ and the ‘uncanny’” (2003: 134-35). In other words, while the different components of the movement could not (nor wished to) be recomposed in the unity of a revolutionary Subject, their particular concerns were recombined in a continuous and intensive movement across disjunctions that Thoburn has described as the politics of minor composition.<sup>8</sup> I shall argue that such politics was intrinsically ironic in that it was predicated upon the knowledge that conjunctive syntheses among different components of the movement could only be precarious and non-totalizing in character. In other words, if the attitude of the PO militant was ironic in that she was aware of the gap between the official party line and the plurality of militant approaches at a local level, the autonomist mobilized irony to experiment with communicative forms that being no longer bound to a party line could be recomposed in ever new configurations.

### In Defense of Irony

Yet if the freedom that derives from unhinging signs from referents fosters aesthetic and linguistic experimentations it also comes at the cost of making politics less legible and universal. As Hayden White has argued, by pointing to “the potential foolishness of all linguistic characterizations of reality as much as to the absurdity of the beliefs it parodies,” the ironist tends to “dissolve all belief in the possibility of positive political actions” (1973: 37-38). The notion that irony exposes the radical contingency of all vocabularies and language games has led liberal philosophers such as Richard Rorty (1989) to conclude that the pursuit of radical autonomy and self-determination should be confined to the private realm. Because the ironic stance allows us to recognize that all truth claims are historic incarnations of specific language games, argues Rorty, the citizens of a liberal democracy should drop “the demand that our autonomy be embodied in our institutions” (65) and ensure instead that democratic institutions assist to the creation of “private self-definitions” while helping reduce the pain of others.

Rorty’s suggestion that an ironist is always aware of the contingency of her own language, selfhood, and community is useful to approach, from a different angle, the aforementioned shift from the grand revolutionary expectations of the 1960s to the movement for the reappropriation of daily life of the 1970s. As previously noted, the creative fringes of *Autonomia* subjected to parody not only the discourse of order but also the rhetoric of the PCI and the Marxist-Leninist formations. The very names of experiences and collectives such as *Maodada*, *Felce e Mirtillo* (a pun of Hammer and Sickle that reads “Fern and Blueberry”), *Risate Rosse* (a pun on Red Brigades that reads “Red Laughs”), *The Absent Mysterious Political Movement*, and *The Stoners Underground* bespeak the emergence of local communist dialects that can be translated with each other but are hardly overdetermined by a Communist master-signifier. These ironic experiments in political communication not only mark the passage from a modern to a postmodern politics—a politics that is aware of the contingency of its own expressive forms—but also set the conditions for an appreciation of communism as something that is reinvented in the daily sociopoetic practices of different discursive communities.

As we have seen, *Radio Alice* was a laboratory that enabled the circulation and hybridization of these new vocabularies. In this respect, Berardi’s insistence that Baudrillard’s dystopian theory of media is more accurate and insightful than Enzensberger’s emphasis on the emancipatory potential of decentralized media not only contradicts Bifo’s longtime involvement with social movements media but opens up a bifurcation in his philosophy that leads to hardly reconcilable outcomes. This is particularly true if we consider that Berardi sees Baudrillard’s strategy of symbolic death and refusal to signify as especially relevant in times of semiotic inflation and information overload such as the ones we live in (Berardi, 2009b: 156).

In *The Soul at Work*, Berardi argues that if *Anti-Oedipus* was the book that preached acceleration as escape from the time of industrial capitalism, Baudrillard understood that with the micro-electronic revolution capital is able to capture the molecular desires of the masses, simulate the event, and erase any

possibility of transformation. Berardi claims that while the refusal of work was a process of subjectivation whereby social time reclaimed its autonomy from the temporality of capitalism, the fractal, “cellularized time” of infocapitalism moves at the speed of light and therefore cannot be further accelerated. It follows that the cultural task of our time is to carve out spaces of autonomy from the chaos and turbulence of the infosphere by decelerating and rediscovering bodily pleasures and human relationships such as friendship, art, and therapy. Citing the late Deleuze and Guattari of *What is Philosophy?* (1994: 201), Berardi reminds us that “we require just a little order to protect us from chaos. Nothing is more distressing than a thought that escapes itself, than ideas that fly off, that disappear hardly formed, already eroded by forgetfulness or precipitated into others that we no longer master” (Deleuze and Guattari cited in Berardi, 2009b: 159).

How can this need of protecting ourselves from the chaos of the exploding infosphere be reconciled with Baudrillard’s catastrophic strategy? Does not Baudrillard’s claim that under the regime of third-order simulacra “things needs to be pushed to the limit” imply a *further deterritorialization* of the relationship between sign and referent?

Even though Berardi defends Baudrillard from the charges of producing a politically dissuasive thought, his attempt to bridge the gap between the theory of desire and the theory of simulacra is only partly successful. Unless we assume that this bridge is in fact a forking path that presents us with a dilemma each time the question of resistance under late capitalism is posed. If we follow Baudrillard’s theory of simulacra, the path leads inevitably to catastrophe—a path that Berardi brings to the extreme when he claims that depression, panic attacks, and suicide are both diffused psychopathologies and some of the more effective political weapons of our time. To the generalized injunction to express himself and “say yes to desire” the subject responds by disconnecting and shutting down all the receptive channels. In the Japanese hikikomori that withdraw from society, the Chechen women whose families have been exterminated by Russian soldiers, the Arab youth subjected to Western economic and military domination Berardi finds the same “feelings of loneliness and loss of meaning” that can be recognized anywhere “the triumph of capitalism has subjugated time, life and emotions to the hellish rhythms of automated competition” (2009b: 168).

If we follow the path of the theory of desire, on the other hand, resistance does not coincide with subjective annihilation or symbolic withdrawal. Rather, it is a matter of carving out spaces of autonomy—Deleuze and Guattari call them “chaoids”—that by modeling chaos allow us to breathe, slow down, find a temporary equilibrium. In this sense, Berardi claims that art and friendship can reinstate sensitive and embodied forms of communication that are both political and therapeutic as they provide shelter from the hyper-stimulation and hyper-exploitation of infocapital (2009b: 136-140). And irony, as we have seen, functions along similar registers. “Ironic interpretations of events presuppose a common understanding between speakers and listeners, ” writes Berardi. “A sympathy among those who, engaged in the ironic act, arrive at a common autonomy from the dictatorship of the Signified” (2011b). If it is true, as Berardi claims, that the hyper-speed of networked communication requires immediate and unambiguous responses, then resistance lies in the capacity to slow down and recuperate the function of interpretation outside and against the imperatives of connectivity. In this respect, irony can help us disconnect from “the punctual and repeatable interaction of algorithmic function” to interpret the intention, context, and nuances of an utterance (Berardi, 2009a: 87).

Even if Berardi does not explicitly articulate it as such, I shall argue that irony in the digital age is for Bifo an aesthetic, intersubjective, and political process. It is *aesthetic* as it implies the mobilization of human sensibility, understood as the bodily faculty of interpreting nonverbal cues and signs that “cannot be expressed in forms that have a finite syntax” (2009a: 87). It is *intersubjective* as it is based upon the shared ability of the ironist and the interpreter to suspend the literal meaning and generate what Hutcheon describes as a “third meaning” from the conflation of the stated and the unstated (60-61). And it is

*political* as the co-interpretation of the ambiguous and the unsaid sets in motion a process of becoming other that is unpredictable and out of control. In this respect, the emergence of the unforeseen poses for Berardi a threat to financial capital, which tends to reduce every process to a set of probabilities. If, as Tiziana Terranova (2004: 24) points out, “information operates as a form of probabilistic *containment* and *resolution* of the instability, uncertainty, and virtuality of a process,” then aesthetic, sensitive, and ironic forms of communication reopen social interaction onto the immeasurable and the uncanny.

### Irony is not Cynicism

While the strategy of symbolic death lays the emphasis on the dyads object-subject and sign-referent—with the former term of the dyad overpowering and dominating the latter—a sympathetic and embodied notion of irony shifts the emphasis to how subjects relate to other subjects by remolding and parodying signs and objects. Besides pointing to the material-semiotic networks theorized by Deleuze and Guattari, the transversal and affective movement of co-interpretation is indicated by Berardi as the key to distinguish irony from cynicism. Berardi derives such a distinction from a meditation on the trajectory of several Italian 1968 intellectuals, which in the 1980s became journalists and commentators in the Berlusconi channels and in the following decade joined the ranks of his populist party Forza Italia. Drawing from empirical evidence, Berardi (2011b) maintains that those who performed such a radical political U-turn were “doctrinaire Marxists” in 1968. Believing that communism was inevitable and “destined to win,” they converted themselves to the winning neoliberal ideology as soon as they realized that the course of history was headed in the opposite direction.

In other words, cynicism is for Berardi a form of affective disinvestment that follows a frustration. The rise of mass cynicism as the ideology of late capitalism analyzed by Peter Sloterdijk (1987) in the early 1980s stems from the failure and disillusionment with the twentieth century utopias. Ironic discourse, on the contrary, implies a shared suspension of reality that is disenchanted from the beginning. If the cynic is disillusioned because having lost his faith decides to align himself with the truth of power, “the ironist,” writes Berardi, “never [had] a faith to begin [with]” (2011b). Drawing from Vladimir Jankélévitch’s (1964) distinction between irony and cynicism, Berardi argues that the latter is a “learned form of irony, used for the pleasure of shocking the philistines” (2011b). Even though irony and cynicism share the same disbelief in the moral content of truth, it is their different relation to power to set them apart:

While irony does not postulate the existence of any reality, cynicism postulates the inescapable reality of power, particularly the power of Economy. Irony opens a game of infinite possibilities, whereas cynicism merely disassociates itself from ethics and possibility. The cynical mood begins with the belief that ethical action is doomed to failure. The ironist sleeps happily because nothing can awake her from her dreams. The cynicist [sic] sleeps lightly. Though he might dream, he awakes as soon as power calls him (Berardi, 2011b).

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek argues that power always requires a minimal distance from its explicit rules in order to function: what cannot be said explicitly is addressed implicitly in order to become acceptable in the public sphere. This “obscene underside” of ideology is for Žižek the invisible premise or the “inherent transgression” the discourse of power rests upon (1989: 28-33). If people are able to maintain a cynical attitude towards overt ideological calls, it is precisely this ironic detachment, argues Žižek, that enables ideology to work as such. In fact, the members of a party, a corporation or an army rarely take the official ideology of their organization too seriously. However, it is through ironic distancing that they become part of a collectivity and this unifying process is precisely the function of ideology.

From this angle we might say that while for Žižek there is only a difference of degree between irony and cynicism—postmodern cynicism is a hardened form of irony—for Berardi there is a difference in kind as the ironist believes in the possible whereas the cynicist stops at the real. Because the ironist knows that there is no truth in the discourse of power—or in the symmetrical ideology of those who believe in the inevitability of liberation—she can share and make the road with other ironists. Paraphrasing Sloterdijk’s famous definition of mass cynicism, we may say that Berardi’s ironists do *not* know very well what they are doing, yet they are still doing it. Such attitude takes the cognitive relativism that characterizes the postmodern condition as the departure point of a movement of recomposition from below.

In the estrangement of the 1960s mass worker, the double moral of the PO militant, the subversive communication experiments of Autonomia, and the daily subtractions from the hyper-connectivity and hyper-exploitation of the network society Berardi traces processes of subjectivation whereby different political cultures and existential orientations meet, clash, grapple with each other—a process that is ironic in character.<sup>9</sup> In *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, Deleuze calls “irony the movement that consists in going beyond the law, towards an higher principle” (Cited in Berardi, 2011b). I would like to suggest that Berardi’s higher principle—his ontological ground, as it were—lies in this commitment to the compositionist method, understood as a pragmatic and affective method of analysis that grounds political initiative not in an ethical horizon determined by historical necessity but in a movement of bodies that refuse to bow to the violent de-realization of semiocapital.

To sum up, in this article I have shown how Berardi’s concept of irony can be used to read processes of subjectivation that emerge at three critical historic junctures. In the late-1960s, the ironic estrangement of the mass workers from the assembly line, the union, and the party ignites the liberation of social energies from the cage of the general interest. In the 1970s, the ironic language of the creative fringes of Autonomia points towards a refusal to speak a conventional political language and the reappropriation of daily life. In the digital age, irony can be used as a device whereby friends and peers learn how to walk together across semiocapital’s desert of the real by developing non-integrated, conjunctive, and unpredictable forms of communication. Because they rely upon and are themselves productive of *chaoids*—temporary assemblages emerging from the chaos of the infosphere—these ironic forms of communication are in my opinion hardly reconcilable with the nihilistic strategy of symbolic death advocated by Baudrillard. Rather, by articulating processes of subjectivation characterized by the proliferation of difference Berardi’s notion of irony invites us to go beyond the mass conformism and cynicism of the postmodern condition as well as the unshakeable and teleological certainties of modernity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See <http://th-rough.eu> and <http://sceptsi.eu>. Last access November 7, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Berardi fled to Paris in March 1977 to escape prosecution for the charge of having instigated the massive street riots that ensued the Carabinieri’s assassination of the student Francesco Lorusso. The charge, which led to closure of Radio Alice, was later dismissed. In September 1977, Berardi collected the signatures of Deleuze and Guattari, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Jean-Paul Sartre, among others, for a petition of the French intellectuals against state repression in Italy. The appeal, which was read at the Bologna convention against repression—the last public gathering of the 1977 Movement—made a sensation and was harshly commented by both conservative newspapers such as *Il Corriere della Sera* and the progressive press affiliated to the PCI.

<sup>3</sup> Tronti’s Copernican revolution is clearly articulated in the article “Lenin in England,” which was originally published on the first issue of *Classe Operaia*: “We too have worked with a concept that puts capitalist development first, and workers second. This is a mistake. And now we have to turn the problem on its head, reverse the polarity, and start again from the beginning: and the beginning is the class struggle of the working class. At the level of socially developed capital, capitalist development becomes subordinated to working class struggles; it follows

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behind them, and they set the pace to which the political mechanisms of capital's own reproduction must be tuned" (Tronti, 1964: 1).

<sup>4</sup> All the quotes from the *Nefasta Utopia of Potere Operaio* are translated by the author. Tronti's ambiguity or unresolved contradiction is well-evident in a passage of *Operai e Capitale* (Workers and Capital) in which Tronti writes: "In this sense the party is not only the scientific bearer of strategy, but also the practical organization of its tactical application. The working class possesses a spontaneous strategy of its own motions and developments: the party must observe it, express it and organize it." Thus on the one hand Tronti seems to argue that while the class has a strategic vision the party is a merely tactical tool—it has to help organize and find practical expressions and solutions to this strategy. On the other hand, because the party is "the scientific bearer of strategy" it can and for Tronti *should* take on the function of directing the class from above.

<sup>5</sup> At the national conference of Potere Operaio in January 1970 the majority of the sections adhering to PO, including Rome, Padua, Florence, and other cadres from the Milan and the South adopt the Bolshevik line of building a strategic direction within the movement. Such line will lead to the constitution of a clandestine armed wing of PO named "Illegal Work." Negri endorses the Leninist turn by arguing that the struggles of the late-1960s have put into crisis the expansive Keynesian policies of post-WWII. If the Keynesian state (what Negri calls the "State-Plan") could still function as a regulator of the social pressure and money as a yardstick of the social wealth, the tendency of the falling rate of profit and the crisis that ensues the factory strikes of the late-1960s opens up a new phase in which financial capital and the state function as pure command on the workforce and instrument of repression, respectively. From the end of the positive dialectic between social struggles and capitalist development Negri derives the need of constituting a political vanguard *extrinsic* to the social and technical composition of class that by "jumping the links that connect the form of the labor process to the emergence of the class" would prepare the attack on the state and the insurrection (Negri, 2006: 29). *Contra* Negri, Berardi maintains that the crisis that ensues the biennium 1968-69 was not the result of capital's attempt to cut its organic link to the social composition of living labor but the beginning of the restructuring process that becomes fully visible, with the decentralization and informatization of production, in the following decade. From this flows that the revolutionary movement should have maintained its "political evolution organic to the internal transformations of the technical and cultural composition of general social labor" rather than embarking on a "subjectivist drift" that would have eventually rendered it a residual force (1998: 130-131). "Residue of the workers-capital conflict that was losing its thrust, residue of the twentieth-century revolutionary forms, residue of a dialectical conception that was unable to grasp the complexity that was emerging beyond the horizon of the crisis," writes Berardi (131). Negri has subsequently acknowledged that the attempt of legitimating a strategic political direction of the movement "did not lead to useful results" (2006: 6).

<sup>6</sup> All block quotes are translated by the author.

<sup>7</sup> "Yet I had this will to live to do something. Because I was young and this blood pulsed in my veins. The pressure was quite high indeed. I wanted to do something. I was disposed to do something. But it was clear to me that something meant not to work as a factory worker anymore.... And why should I have cared of work if it did not even give me enough money to thread on (*campare*) well. Now I had understood I had experimented all the possible ways of living. In the beginning I wanted to integrate myself then I understood that even if I integrated myself in the system I would have always paid. For every kind of life there was a price to be paid" (Balestrini, 2004: 100).

<sup>8</sup> Thoburn derives the concept of minor politics by adapting to the social field Deleuze and Guattari's notions of minor literature and minor language (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 16-27; 1987: 104-106). In their book on Kafka (1986), Deleuze and Guattari describe minor literature as a literature whose language is characterized by a high degree of deterritorialization, is immediately political, and in which "everything takes on a collective value."

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps Berardi's view of irony is overly optimistic and one-sided. Cultural studies scholars and critics such as Thomas Frank (1998), Naomi Klein (1999), and Heath and Potter (2004) and have shown how since the 1960 advertisers have appropriated the counterculture critique of the consumer society to market new products and produce a new type of consumer. Beginning in the 1980s, the rise in popularity of TV channels such as MTV and Comedy Central and of genres such as reality TV and political satire suggest that irony and cynicism are integral to the popular culture of the postmodern era. Furthermore, Paolo Virno (2004) has suggested that opportunism and cynicism are the emotional qualities of a new generation of workers that having grown up in a job market characterized by permanent instability have learned how to exploit rules that are always provisional (and hence perceived as conventional and groundless) for personal gain. Yet Berardi's conception of irony does not limit itself to appreciate ironic distancing and emotional detachment as functional to a further integration of the subject, but invites us to think these affects in the context of forms of cultural production that are horizontal and self-referential.

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One may think of the recent rise of image boards, Internet memes, viral videos and social news sites as examples of media whereby individuals join subcultures that are by and large autonomous from the mainstream. Furthermore, being rooted in the autonomous culture of radical social movements, Berardi's notion of irony still privileges embodied and situated forms of political participation that cannot be explained through a classic cultural studies framework, which is indebted to the Gramscian notion of cultural hegemony.

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