

DISOBEDIENCE AND COGNITARIAT

A conversation with Franco Berardi (Bifo)

Marco Scotini: Several theories, such as yours, that have surfaced from the Italian *operaismo* - workerism - currently argue that civil disobedience, once stripped of its liberal tradition, represents “the basic form of political action of the multitude”. Premising by saying that you don’t like to define yourself using the term “multitude” but prefer “social subjectivity”, or “social chain”, what do you feel is the role of civil disobedience? Increasingly, “exodus” and “desertion” seem to have become key words in the post-Fordist lexicon.

Bifo: I would propose fitting the concept of civil disobedience into the more general theme concerning the exodus, or “subtraction”. What does “subtraction” mean? In my opinion, it is a concept that is quite close to, or which determines more precisely, what we have always understood together with the question of the refusal of work. The refusal of work – which is probably the concept that most deeply marks the entire Italian autonomism and *operaismo* (workerism) experience – is the deep understanding and awareness of a separation between useful and felicitous activity and its obligatory productive destination. The refusal of work is not necessarily a sign of laziness, although can also be that, but it shouldn’t be attached such an oversimplified definition. On the contrary, it is “active life”: active life as the capability to capture what is most useful and happy for us and our community.

When the historic process and political violence force performance to an escalating, inevitable degree – for reasons that are not only social but are also linked to the social psychic dimension and existential impoverishment – then subtraction becomes an action (that can only be a collective nature) through which we reconstruct the basic condition for active life. For example, I am amazed at how little we have thought (when the refusal of work was a commonly-used tool) about the fact that most people really want to work because the rest of life can be so unhappy. Deep down, the workplace is a sort of haven and a way to affirm one’s identity. “Subtraction” means building collective situations in which the sense lies in the pleasure and utility of building something together with others. Perhaps the historic defeat of the politics of movement is related to the fact that we have worked exhaustively toward *pars destruens* on the refusal of work and not enough on building situations of collective happiness. We have talked about it sporadically but over past few years, the issue has come up more and more frequently, but we haven’t been able – especially in the 1970s – to match destruction of its domination on work and construction of permanent spaces of collective existence in subtraction.

M.S.: Indeed, in one of your essays, widely defined as a “manifesto for creative desertion” which was published the day after September 11th, 2001, you exhorted: “We will not side with either group. Quite the opposite, we must immediately begin to organize great feasts, dance without restraint in the streets of the city, court new lovers, journey in search of sunny beaches, and not give a damn about the tragedy that the extremists have caused. They have killed thousands of our brothers in the Twin Towers of New York; they have killed thousands of our brothers in the Union Carbide factory. It would be better to desert all the places where war is being waged. The warriors are not only armed with cannons and rifles, but also wage wars of labour and exploitation.” Your suggestion is that it’s not enough to abandon, we have “to organize great feasts”. You suggest that the abandonment option is necessary but perhaps not enough...

Bifo: I don’t know if it is naïveté or perhaps the deeper Hegelian failing which leads one to think that negation automatically institutes. This couldn’t be further from the truth. It is as if the ability to build positive elements, to build collective happiness, was absent from the subversive movements as an individual responsibility, as a specific problem and not a simple corollary of the revolution. Deep down, the entire

history of the autonomist movements is a history in which, in the best-case scenario, the problem of the positive form is perceived as a question of social engineering. Accomplished socialism is not the right way. What other road of experimentation can we take? The issue of the quality of autonomist life has never been faced, apart from a few instances of the American Free Speech Movement or the Italian 1977 movement in Bologna; or, going back even further, some rare and lofty instances in the literary avant-garde of the 1920s and '30s. This isn't a secondary weakness; it is perhaps the essential weak point of the entire history that we've experienced, not only in the decades in which we have been active, but also throughout the 20th century. It is a problem that the Soviet revolution had already endured with the figure of Majakovskij, with the presence of a part of the cultural movement that accompanied the Russian revolution and that the problem marked but was never able to resolve, either due to its own inability or due to the power of the historic tragedy that it was initiating. The fact remains that we have never been able to view happiness as a chief problem in the historic process. Reading the book by Jonathan Franzen entitled "The Corrections" you gradually begin to see that the fact that men strive for their own enslavement is because it represents the only way that man can recognize his own worth.

M.S.: Compared with your study on autonomy you have always placed importance on the role that forms and tools of communication can play in it, and indeed have traditionally played. More than anyone else, you insisted on overturning media-centred passiveness and the forms that can give back a transformational process in which the only possibility for free communication is to keep the conflict wide open. I am referring to your historic experience with "A/traverso", Radio Alice, and more recently with media activism and "telestreet" practices. When I think of the communicative immediacy of free radio, it seems natural to associate them with the parallel experience of Italian video activists and the Alberto Grifi case as emblematic examples of how the media has become a political component in the struggle.

Bifo: You have used the expression "instrument" but you also emphasized the fact that in the history of independent communication, there is – consciously or unconsciously – a search for non-instrumental immediacy, or better, expressive immediacy. Throughout the history of modern politics, including the politics of movements, the predominant idea has always been that communication is an instrument for pursuing objectives which are in some way external to them. The most favourable and productive moments of communication are the ones where we understand that things are not really that way. Communication is not an instrument because the public can understand what has to be understood. Communication is effective when there is a possibility to be what we want in the social space. Communication is effective when it becomes public domain and can be shared. It is not an announcement of what is not working or what should be done in another way, but a shared space of enjoyment and pleasure where we can be together. This is how communication reacquires its original significance of "commonality", of "becoming common", of building a land where we are quite happy to plant our feet.

M.S.: In addition to this common ground, which has given us the various forms of communication, what do you think is the more general relationship between the 1977 movement and present-day movements on a global scale? You have referred to the 1977 movement as "bad utopia" and recently, in reference to the "Seattle population" it has been said that "a" cycle of the movement, or even "the" cycle of the movement, has come to an end. Or perhaps it is only changing form ...

Bifo: The 1977 movement in its expressive forms and in its political intuitions seems to be current in the behavioural strategies of the movement after Seattle, and more generally, in the behaviours of political and existential independence in the living cultures (I can no longer use the word alternative) of our times. How come? From my perspective, the answer lies in the two-sided, ambivalent nature of the 1977 movement,

which is partly influenced – especially in its awareness – by the history of the workers’ and communist revolution of the 20th century. On the other hand (and perhaps in the more vibrant, deeper and less superficially sensitive part), it is an anticipation of the social and anthropological crisis of the forms of modernity and perhaps of the forms of humanity. The 1977 movement is the first view of a painful encounter between the humanist dimension, which has continued throughout the 20th century, and the intervention of an unsettling post-human dimension that technology and the power of the capitalist machine force upon social life. When the movement perceives the advent of a new age, it perceives it as a movement of desperation, as if the instruments that we had previously used (intellectual, political, existential) were wholly inadequate to process a subject matter so complex, mobile and rich in elements of automatism. However, it seems to me that the limit of the 1977 movement has not yet been overcome: it was mainly a limit of power. We were humanists and we had to formulate an argument that required engineers. Today, they have proliferated into the movement. So, what is missing? The scientific construction of an independent and happy existence. The 1977 movement has posed a problem that concerns the forms of intellectual power to face the power of a machine and on this plane, I feel that we have made giant steps forward thanks to the Internet, for example. The work– enormously enlarged – we haven’t yet faced today is to take stock of the social unhappiness that beset us from every direction.

M.S.: To sum up, I am trying to reformulate the initial question tackled by our conversation in your own terms. Considering the role that this new cognitive proletariat figure plays in your assumptions, as a producer of tangible and intangible goods, what is the real form of civil disobedience of the cognitariat?

Bifo: Civil disobedience in the form of “subtraction” is the positive occurrence of the refusal of work. The cognitariat crystallizes disobedience. The cognitariat represents the ability of the social brain to give itself a body, namely, to be not only *cognitio*, not only cognitive work, but to have social and bodily aspects and a social and cognitive relationship at the same time. If civil disobedience crystallizes in the cognitariat, it can also be said that disobedience means autonomy not only with respect to the rules but also the motivations and expectations of life. There is no autonomy if we think we have access to everything that the consumer society seems to want to force on us to the forms of life and learning. If we are prisoners to the expectations produced by capitalism, it is clear that it cannot give independence. Autonomy is nothing more than a movement of forms of life, culture, and production subtracted from the totality of the capital. But once this is said, how can we concretely meet the needs of the social community? The cognitariat has a much more substantial answer than the revolutionary classes of the 20th century had: this is the sense in which the cognitariat approaches the moment where subtraction achieves positive social practice.