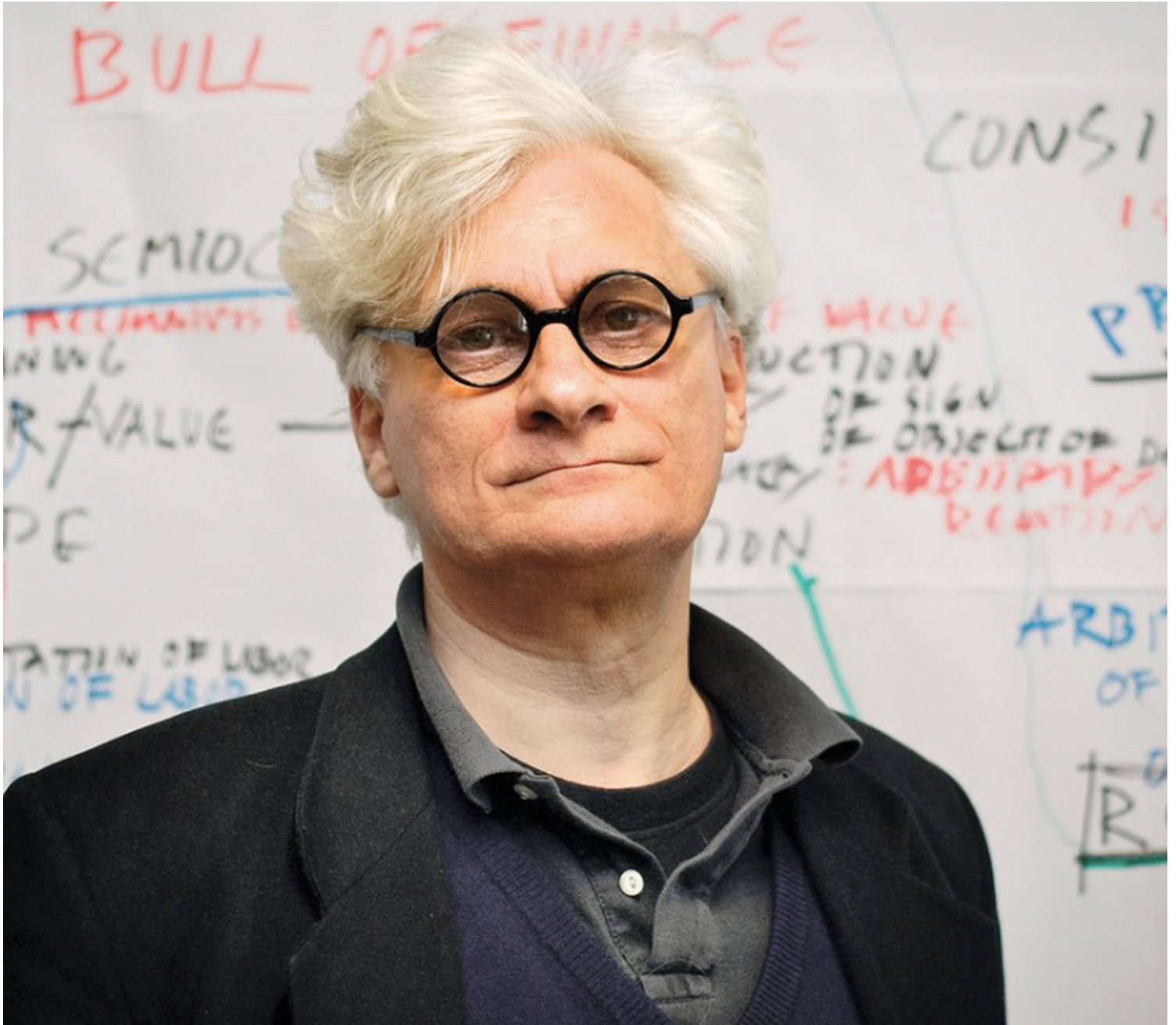


MORE SPEED? MORE STRENGTH? MORE CONSUMPTION? MORE THINGS?—A MEDITATION ON LOVE IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

Posted on March 15, 2020 by Andrew Brown



Franco 'Bifo' Berardi

READINGS

Matthew 6:19-29 (trans. David Bentley Hart):

[Jesus said:] Do not store up treasures for yourself on the earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves penetrate by digging and steal; Rather, store up for yourself treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves neither penetrate by digging nor steal; For where your treasure is, there your heart will also be. The lamp of the body is the eye. Thus if your eye be pure your entire body will be radiant; But if your eye be baleful your entire body will be dark. So if the light within you is darkness, how very great the darkness. No one can be a slave to two lords; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will stand fast by the one and disdain the other. You cannot be a slave both to God and to Mammon. Therefore I say to you: Do not worry, regarding your soul, what you will eat; nor, regarding your body, what you will wear. Is not your soul more than food and your body more than garments? See the birds of the sky—that they neither sow nor reap nor gather into granaries; and your heavenly Father feeds them; are you not more excellent than they? But who among you can, by worrying, lengthen the span of his life by a single cubit? And why do you worry over clothing? Look closely at the lilies of the field how they grow; they neither labor nor spin; Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his glory was garbed like one of them.

—o0o—

Fifth Elegy (extract) from the Duino Elegies

by **Rainer Maria Rilke** (Trans. **C. F. MacIntyre**)

Angel, if there were a place we don't know, and there
on some ineffable carpet, the lovers who never
could bring off their feats here, could show
their bold lofty figures of heart-swings,
their towers of ecstasy, their pyramids
that long since, where there was no standing-ground,

were tremblingly propped together — could succeed
before the spectators around them, the innumerable silent
dead:
would not these then throw their last, ever-hoarded,
ever-hidden, unknown to us, eternally
valid coins of happiness
before that pair with the finally genuine smile
on the assuaged carpet?

Fifth Elegy (extract) from the Duino Elegies

by **Rainer Maria Rilke** (Trans. **Stephen Mitchell**)

Angel ! : If there were a place that we didn't know of, and
there,
on some unsayable carpet, lovers displayed
what they never could bring to mastery here—the bold
exploits of their high-flying hearts,
their towers of pleasure, their ladders

that have long since been standing where there was no

ground, leaning

just on each other, trembling,—and could *master* all this,

before the surrounding spectators, the innumerable soundless

dead:

Would these, then, throw down their final, forever saved-up,

forever hidden, unknown to us, eternally valid

coins of happiness before the at last

genuinely smiling pair on the gratified

carpet?

—o0o—

ADDRESS

More speed? More strength? More consumption? More Things?—A meditation on Love in the time of Coronavirus

Given our current situation, with all the worries it naturally brings, it seems to me impossible at the moment to give any address which does not, in some fashion, directly relate in the most positive ways possible meaningfully to the current situation. To do otherwise would be, at least in my opinion, merely to be sticking one's head in the sand — a foolish strategy at any time, but especially at this moment of time.

Naturally, I do not wish to diminish the very significant, and possibly huge, dark and downsides to what may transpire in the coming weeks and months but I do wish to emphasise the possible and, at times, perhaps actual important and necessary upsides even though, at the moment, they may seem to be extremely limited and apparently insignificant. I think it's worth remembering the old proverb that the darkest place is at the bottom of the lighthouse, i.e., even as it shines a saving light out into the gloom right where we are standing it is as dark as dark can be.

Given this fact it is vitally important always to remember another proverb, namely, that 'great oaks from little acorns grow' and so my strategy for today, and for the next few weeks, will be to consider, as best as I can, the 'little acorns' wherever I find them in the hope that they may, in time, truly turn into great oaks.

So, for the first of my possible little acorns I want to turn again to someone whose work has had a profound and positive influence over my own thinking over the past decade, the Italian philosopher, [Franco 'Bifo' Berardi](#).

In this address, for your own ease of access later on to the ideas expressed here, I concentrate only upon what Berardi says in a short, twenty-four minute filmed interview made in 2011 to accompany his then new book, *'After the Future.'* You can watch that by clicking the link below.

[Bifo: After the Future](#)

I should also add that, although this address starts with a rehearsal of some dark but important (if very sketchy) genealogical notes about how we got where we are today, they are there simply to help us better grasp the message of hope Berardi wishes to bring us. So hang in there.

Berardi begins by pointing out that, for our own Western European and North American culture, ideas of in what the future consists have for a long, long time now been tied closely to the hope and desire for more energy, more speed, more strength, more consumption, more things and, alas, more violence; simply put the the idea of the future has all been about more and more and more.

Berardi feels that the early twentieth-century Italian Futurist movement can be seen as our final step into this modern, futurist age.

[Futurism \(Italian: *Futurismo*\)](#) was an international artistic and social movement which originated in Italy and which delighted in wholly rejecting the past primarily by embracing speed, technology, youth, violence, war and the what were then very new material objects such as the car, the aeroplane and the modern, industrialised city.

[Filippo Tommaso Marinetti \(1876–1944\)](#), the movement's founding figure, brought all these things together in his Futurist Manifesto of 1908 which was to prove highly congenial to the nascent Italian Fascist movement. It's a nasty document that exalts violence and particularly despised anything to do with women or what it thought was feminine because, for the Futurists, the woman/the feminine was the epitome of weakness and sensuousness, in short, everything that modern energy wanted — and still wants — to forget.

Berardi feels, and I agree with him, that Futurism played a key part in bringing the world to its current state of despair because it helped deliver up to us a futurism without a future. Modern capitalism is, of course, a child of Futurism and we can see this particularly in its obsession with more and more speed and more and more growth which, in turn, has led to the destruction of our world in the name of the future — or rather, it has led to the world's destruction in the name of **its** idea of the future.

By 1977 — [the year of the Queen's Silver Jubilee](#) — many people like Berardi were beginning to intuit that if this was the future then, as far as we were concerned, there was no future. Indeed, for my generation, [Generation X](#), nothing, but nothing, summed-up this nascent feeling better than the Sex Pistols' single of that year, 'God Save the Queen', which contains the oft repeated refrain, 'no future, no future for you.'



Consequently, as the decades have passed, retrospectively, 1977 has become for many of us the symbolic watershed moment when we were first forced to begin to seek ways to articulate something beyond the future because, for us, the future was over. Here, of course, is the origin of Berardi's book title 'After the Future.'

There have been many responses to this feeling and not all of them have been positive — after all the Sex Pistols were themselves far from being noted purveyors of hope — but some responses have been, including that suggested by Berardi. Berardi was amongst those who became aware that, because our very possibility of joy was being destroyed by capitalism and growth, we needed to find ways to live in a *post-futurist* fashion.

A key act of rebellion was to find more time to live in the present and to choose what he calls the slowness of pleasure. In this he reveals some very strong Epicurean tendencies, the only philosophy which seems to me to offer us a genuine way out of our current malaise. Anyway, at this point in his interview Berardi quotes Jesus teaching about the birds of the air and flowers of the field because, for Berardi, they are unparalleled examples of creatures who don't work in order to accumulate or possess things but are, instead, creatures who never cease to live in time (in season) and to find their pleasures in time. Bifo's basic point here is that unlike most other things, time is not something you can accumulate as you can with, for example, gold, money and

material things. When it comes to time you can only live in it, taking pleasure in the becoming other of yourself, being yourself without protecting yourself. This, for Berardi, is post-futurism.

To live like the birds of the air and the flowers of the field requires what Berardi calls ‘ungrowth’ — an ugly word that he admits is only an approximation to a better concept we still need to invent. However, essentially, it’s a word which helps us see the need for our society to let go of its obsession with growth and to encourage the kind of responses we begin to make when we realize, truly realize, that we do not need more money and more things and that what we most certainly need is more time, more joy.

Berardi notes that ‘ungrowth’ seems to some people to hint at something ‘less’ but this is not at all the case. It’s a word that seeks to remind us that what we need is not less life or less pleasure. No! Not at all. It’s a word that reminds us we need more life, more pleasure. But this, in turn does not imply more consumption, more merchandise or more work. Berardi is insistent that we are dying because of the huge bubble of work and that we have all been working too much over the past 500 years. Berardi’s call, delivered straight to camera is, therefore:

“Stop working now, start living, please.”

It is in this context that Berardi reads the extract from Rilke’s Fifth Duino Elegy that you heard earlier. I realise that on the surface it’s an allusive and apparently obscure text but in the context of Berardi’s discourse I think it’s actually a fairly straightforward one.

What we have is (were it possible) a poet asking an Angel what would it be like were we who are utterly obsessed with the future — that imagined future of more and more and more gain and more and more and more material goods — what would it be like if we (and the dead of countless generations around us) could see, actually see, two lovers consummate their love on that beautiful carpet, both fully in the moment, both fully in time, both fully taking the slow, bodily pleasure and joy in their becoming (each)other? In other words, it is to be asking something akin to what would it be like were we able to live like the birds of the air and the flowers of the field?

What might seeing a couple be like this make us do? Well Rilke suggests, it would make us willing to cast on to that carpet everything, but everything we had accumulated, even our last, ever-hoarded, ever-hidden, even unknown, eternally valid coins of happiness and that act of giving would, finally, bring to our lips and whole being perhaps our first genuine, smile.

Seeing this conjunction of bodies also serves to remind us we, too, have a body and that the deep joys and pleasures this body can bring us can only be had in the moment, in the now, in the encounter and embrace of others. For Berardi this is all about becoming a singularity, that is to say becoming ourselves in the act of being slowly, pleurably, joyfully intertwined with the other. This intra-connected way of being in the world is in stark contrast to the modern, capitalist obsession with individuality and which has continually encouraged only accumulation and the separation of the self from the world.

Berardi wants us to see that the way we have been in the world for far, far too long has caused us to forget both our body, our place in time and the expressions of love which cannot be accumulated.

But our capitalist world — until only a few weeks ago — wanted only our fragments of time (think here of the gig economy with its zero hours contracts and no sick- or holiday pay); it most certainly did not want us as true embodied, social human beings.

I fully realise that current events are deeply frightening and worrying and what transpires may (in fact I'm sure, will) bring us real suffering. I cannot pretend otherwise. But, notice this. In the twinkling of an eye, our capitalist world no longer needs (or can now have) our time and we now simply have to find another way of being together that is not directed at gain, at accumulation, at getting more and things, but which is directed at being together, like Rilke's lovers on the carpet, lovingly, compassionately and supportively in this moment now.

Shocking and difficult though this moment is and will remain for a good while yet, it does offer us an opportunity to come back together lovingly embraced one with each other on the ineffable, assuaged carpet of this moment now. Give that this is a flu pandemic this embrace cannot be a literalistic one but it can be a philosophical, religious, spiritual, artistic and social one through the sharing of story, poetry and song, perhaps something akin to that presented by great Italian Renaissance author [Boccaccio's \(1313-1375\)](#) in his famous work, "[The Decameron](#)" set in 1348 whilst a terrible plague running unchecked in Florence. Boccaccio's response to this was to begin to articulate a simple, civil humanism of neighbourly love which is able confidently to act upon the maxim: *Umana cosa è aver compassione degli afflitti* — It is human to have compassion for those in distress. [[I've written about this in another context at this link.](#)] It strikes me that Berardi (and Epicurus) offer us powerful resources to do this in our own time.

But this moment of loving embrace and togetherness that Berardi and I are advocating cannot be accumulated for the future — it can only be expressed in now and in every consecutive moment hence because there is no such *thing* as love but only *acts* of love. In the end, as our own religious tradition's central exemplar Jesus always knew, only love displayed to our neighbour in the present moment will ever be sufficient to save us all.