

The Post-Modern Hero: When the Spectacle Becomes Reality

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Abstract:

In his darkly thought-provoking book, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi considers capitalism's effect on mental health through the lens of crime and suicidal mass murder. *Heroes* speculates on the trajectory of human history by delineating the implications of the growth of spectacular suicidal mass murder: capitalism's bleeding together of capital, politics, media, virtuality, mental health, and violence. For Berardi, suicide is a declaration of autonomy as well as a form of resistance that represents "the most significant political act" (195) in the current age of nihilism and capitalist absolutism. What is Berardi's answer to capitalist absolutism and a regressive, violent future? Nothing is to be done, so don't hope. Distance yourself with irony. While *Heroes* does not claim to be a manifesto, Berardi does intend it as an anecdote to the degeneration of human evolution and a map for a new ethics.

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The Post-Modern Hero: When the Spectacle Becomes Reality

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"It is obvious to anybody the hatred [among Muslims] is beyond comprehension," explained the GOP frontrunner in the 2016 American presidential race Donald Trump with regard to his call for the ban of all Muslims from entering the country, "Where this hatred comes from and why, we will have to determine... our country cannot be the victims of horrendous attacks by people that believe only in jihad, and have no sense of reason or respect for human life" (Epstein, Nicholas). Trump's announcement, and the popular outrage over its unconstitutionality and racist demagoguery, came five days after the mass shooting in San Bernardino and nearly a month after ISIS's attack on Paris. The celebrity businessman turned aspiring politician's statements exhibited a spectacularly xenophobic politics – a fascist politics of identitarian obsession as the 'chosen people' in opposition to a demonized Other. Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaign is not disturbing simply because his regressive fundamentalism constructs a mythical Christian American identity at moral war with jihadist Islam, but also because he has transferred power from the capitalist domain to the political stage. To progress is to regress; to win in capitalism is to win in politics.

At least this is how Franco 'Bifo' Berardi might describe the absurd phenomenon of Trump based on his darkly thought-provoking book *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide*, which continues the Italian autonomist thinker's study of capitalism's effect on mental health. For Berardi, the lens of crime and suicide offers a critical perspective with which to observe "the current becoming of the world" (1), because these macabre subjects reveal "the agony of capitalism and the dismantling of social civilization" (2). Although the book at first appears to be a collection of case studies probing for the suicidal mass murderers' motives, *Heroes* is not about mass murder and suicide, as such. It is rather about what the growth of spectacular suicidal mass murder is indicative of: capitalism's bleeding together of capital, politics, media, virtuality, mental health, and violence. Capital has become increasingly abstract and pervasive, a force at work on both the global political and individual cognitive scales. And it's not going away.

With the goal of speculating on the trajectory of human history, the book's impressive breadth spans news articles, histories, novels, films, psychological studies, as well as Internet manifes-

tos written by young mass murderers. These sources work together to tease out the anthropological and political implications of spectacular suicidal murder as a result of the perpetrators' hyper-stimulated "psychosphere," something Berardi calls "an exceptional manifestation of a general trend" of human desensitization to bodily experience (47). Placing philosophers in the same discussion as dystopian novels and South Korean films, *Heroes* draws heavily on Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*, Arthur Kroker's *Spasm*, and Félix Guattari's *Chaosmosis* in delineating the current age of nihilism (or, annihilating nihilism) and capitalist absolutism. In this economic survival of the fittest, a social Darwinist ethics informs a person – especially a young, technologically immersed, and socially marginalized male – that he is not the winner, resulting in a "suicidal form of the Neoliberal will to win" (51). His "aggressive, murderous explosion of the self" (56) not only stands as his only possible response to oppression, but also signifies that a generation of the non-existing – "the virtual, unemployed, futureless generation" (73) – ever lived at all. This violent declaration of autonomy goes hand-in-hand with the death of modernity and the death of its hero and ethics. Suicide, declares Berardi, is "the most significant political act" (195).

Heroes posits suicide as a metaphorically charged act wherein the human psychosphere, national(ist) identity, capitalist economics and politics, life, and death collide. Berardi interprets the midnight theater shooting by the Aurora "Joker" killer as "breaking the separation between spectacle and real life" (1): a Joker imitates the Joker, bringing it to "real life," which brings about "real death." Spectacular suicidal murder not only breaks the borders between self and surroundings, but between killing and being killed. When living and dying enter the realm of the immortality and even reproducibility as spectacular images, and when "information flows" pervade the public discourse and imagination, simulation takes center stage in the "shared hallucination" of the world (25). In a world in which reality is substituted by its image, identity is also constructed by an illusion, namely the myths of belonging and nationhood. According to Berardi, capitalism prompts a need for "re-territorialization" and a return to the past by reappropriating an original identity to "Make [That Nation] Great Again." The community is thus trapped in a fundamentalist identity in which only the gaze of the Other functions as the mirror of self-identification. An example thereof is the American response to 9/11, or what Berardi calls "symmetrically answering suicide with another form of suicide" (147): infinite war. Undoubtedly, 9/11 as a political and media event ushered in a new era of transnationalism and media warfare. Disturbingly, Trump's media attention for wanting to ban Muslims and deport immigrants bespeaks Berardi's dystopia.

What is Berardi's answer to capitalist absolutism and a regressive, violent future? Nothing is to be done, so don't hope. Distance yourself with irony. *Heroes* does not claim to be a manifesto, but Berardi does intend it as an anecdote to the degeneration of human evolution and a map for a new ethics. While useful for its wide-reaching analysis that prompts readers to consider their relationship to technology, politics, and capitalism, Berardi's use of philosophical and biopolitical jargon is not for the faint of heart. Nevertheless, *Heroes* offers its readers a way to reflect on different kinds of violence and the systems that support that violence. For

those who find themselves in need of such a way to mitigate their fear of violence, remember: there's no way out. So don't hope.

Just read.