

## BOOK REVIEWS

### WE CAN BE

A review of *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* by Franco 'Bifo' Berardi (London: Verso, 2015)

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I was a junior in high school when I turned the TV on. / James Huberty went to a restaurant, shot everyone up with a machine gun. / It was from my hometown. / We talked about it 'til the sun went down. / Then everybody got up and stretched and yawned, then our lives went on.

'Pray for Newtown' - Sun Kil Moon (*Benji*. Caldo Verde, 2014)

'Why did I write such a horrible book?' (p. 199) asks Franco 'Bifo' Berardi at the start of the concluding chapter of *Heroes*, the Italian autonomist<sup>1</sup> thinker's contribution to Verso's "Futures" series. Thankfully for the reader, Berardi is not criticising the quality of *Heroes*, but rather the subject matter covered within. As Berardi goes on to exclaim, 'crime, mass murders, suicide – these are not subjects for a good natured guy' (p. 199). Berardi is here trying to explain – perhaps more to himself than to the reader – the 'mixture of repulsion and perverse fascination' (p. 1) which he feels in response to the spectacular acts of violence perpetrated by the likes of James Holmes, Adam Lanza and Anders Behring Breivik. The use of the word "spectacular" is not accidental for at

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<sup>1</sup> Autonomism is an anti-authoritarian left-wing movement which emphasises the actions of individuals in their daily lives as opposed to more centralised resistance.

least in the case of Holmes, there appears to have been an attempt to break ‘the separation between spectacle and real life... [Holmes] wanted to eliminate the separation between the spectator and the movie’ (pp. 1-2). Berardi does not suggest that this was a conscious philosophically derived act – he doubts whether ‘James Holmes has ever read Guy Debord’ (p. 1). He then adds as an ironic addendum that ‘often, people act without reading the relevant texts’ (p. 1). This combination of lightness and seriousness continues throughout, a difficult tightrope to manoeuvre yet Berardi manages it with admirable ease.

*Heroes* treats mass murder and suicide (and in particular the sort of mass murder which culminates in the suicide of the perpetrator) as the ‘extreme manifestation of one of the main trends of our age’ (p. 3). The perpetrators are ‘heroes of an age of nihilism and stupidity: the age of financial capitalism’ (p. 3). Berardi carefully distinguishes financial capitalism from the earlier industrial capitalism (pp. 89-92). Whilst the latter had many issues as outlined by writers such as Marx and Engels, for Berardi financial capitalism is much more insidious. Sharing characteristics with the dystopia in Huxley’s *Brave New World*, financial capitalism has resulted ‘in the desertification of the landscape and the virtualisation of emotional life... causing an immense loneliness and despair in the population that is difficult to consciously oppose’ (pp. 194-195).

Most of the book’s chapters begin with a description of a particular incident of mass murder or suicide. This is then followed by discussions of politics, philosophy, movies, personal anecdotes from the author, and so on. These jumps in topics will not be to the taste of every reader, and some may find it an impenetrable barrier. The book is most rewarding if read as the publisher intended for the series in which it belongs – as an intervention on

political and philosophical topics. It is a stream of thoughts in order to provoke further thoughts.

‘The Automaton’, which focuses upon the Breivik case, is the chapter most relevant to the journal’s theme for this issue. After noting Breivik’s diagnosis of alexithymia – an inability to recognise and describe his own feelings (p. 94) – Berardi centres on what he considers to be Breivik’s identitarian<sup>2</sup> ideology. Berardi ascribes to Breivik a fear that European identity is being contaminated by two interrelated poisons: cultural Marxism and Islam. Cultural Marxists, the ‘essential enemy of European identity’ (p. 95), are using mass immigration, and in particular mass Islamic immigration, as a tool to erase Christian Europe’s identity. Berardi attributes this belief to Breivik’s ‘identitarian obsession: the self-identification as the ‘chosen people’, which implies... the identification of the other as the enemy of truth and of the good’ (p. 101). Berardi characterises Breivik as a neo-conservative killer (p. 95), suggesting that his ideology is ‘not so far removed from the agenda of conservative political movements the world over’ (p. 100). Herein lies a missed opportunity for discussion: both Berardi and the identitarians have the same distrust and distaste for the stultifying effects of neoliberal financial capitalism, but the identitarians view multiculturalism and mass immigration as a symptom of this whilst Berardi views these as part of a possible solution. Both Breivik and Berardi believe the current system must be transcended – the difference lies in what shape the ideal future should take. Berardi’s own stated solution that the best way to ‘deny any possibility of becoming a fascist... [is to] resist any pressure to identify oneself’ (p. 103) is not entirely convincing. A more nuanced explanation of how the coexistence of different identities need not result in a Manichean struggle would be more

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<sup>2</sup> Identitarianism places importance on the role of shared ethnic-cultural identity (typically, white European). It is most commonly connected to radical and far-right political and social movements such as the *Bloc Identitaire* in France and the *Identitäre Bewegung* in Austria.

effective. For this reason and more, this is not the strongest chapter in the book. This may be because Breivik's actions were explicitly political, meaning that there is less hidden meaning to explore. Berardi is stronger when teasing out themes concealed beneath the surface of the actions of Holmes, Lanza and Seung-Hui Cho, rather than the political killings of Breivik and Baruch Goldstein.

Berardi's positive vision set out in the concluding chapter is the most difficult part of the book to grasp due to it being the most postmodernist, with many passages relying on neologisms from the writings of Félix Guattari. Berardi describes the chaotic *spasm* being caused by 'info-technologies... provoking an acceleration of the rhythm of information and experience, [whilst] simultaneously the space for physical movement and the resources for economic expansion are shrinking' (pp. 216-217). What is needed in response to this (using Guattari's terminology) is *chaosmosis* – an 'osmotic passage from a state of chaos to a new order' (p. 220). The current situation can be transcended through a change to a new form of thinking. A *chaoide* (another Guattari term) can be a tool to achieve this chaosmosis. A chaoide is an 'artistic poetic, political [or] scientific... [communication] which is able to open the linguistic flows to different rhythms and to different frames of interpretation' (p. 222). Berardi explains that 'the chaoide is full of chaos, receives and decodes the bad vibrations of the planetary spasm, but does not absorb the negative psychological effects of chaos, of the surrounding aggressiveness, of fear' (pp. 221-222). *Heroes* is Berardi's attempt at producing a chaoide – it describes the horrors of the modern world with a playful ironic tone in conscious opposition to the terror described.

Irony in the face of dystopia (*dyst-irony*) is central for Berardi. In some of the most playful sections of the book Berardi rejects the traditional leftist call for political awareness because most people

know something is wrong, the problem is that it is likely nothing can be done (p. 224). He explains that ‘ironic autonomy is the answer... do not take part in the game, do not expect any solution from politics, do not be attached to things, do not hope’ (p. 225), adding ‘if you have to choose between death and slavery, don’t be a slave... You will die anyway; it is not particularly important when. What is important is how you live your life’ (p. 225). If the reader is not convinced by Berardi’s analysis, he concludes by reminding them not to take him or what he has written too seriously – ‘Irony is about the independence of the mind from knowledge; it is about the excessive nature of the imagination. So, at the very end: don’t believe (me) (p. 226). With this statement the book ends.

*Heroes* is a book the reader will either find stimulating, irritating, or perhaps both. You do not have to share Berardi’s vision of financial capitalism as the *causa prima* of the world’s ills to find the book useful, but this *idée fixe* remains a stumbling block. In his criticisms of the contemporary world, Berardi shares many positions with Martin Heidegger. Heidegger also saw the importance of thinking, poetry and art for authentic being. For Heidegger, the key problem is the dominance of the metaphysical/technological-scientific worldview which achieved hegemony when the thought of the pre-Socratic thinkers was overcome. If Berardi had focussed more on the primacy of thought rather than economics – a focus that his discussion implies – with financial capitalism being a symptom of these thought processes (rather than the thought processes being a symptom of financial capitalism), his argumentation would have been strengthened and his discourse would have been more open to those who do consider themselves to be part of the anti-capitalist left. Despite Berardi’s efforts, the next mass murder will no doubt be met by most with an initial moment of shock,

followed by a sigh and then indifference. The signs of malaise are all around us, but we choose not to look.