MEMORIES OF THE FUTURE
DISPATCHES FROM THE FUTURELESS PRESENT
by Ross Wolfe

Figure 1 — Narkomfin building, Moscow (designed by Moisei Ginzburg and Ignatiei Milinis, built 1929; photo by Liza Dedova, February 2011)
Memories of the Future
Dispatches from the Futureless Present

Today it is well known that the future has become a thing of the past. Gone are the days when humanity dreamt of a different tomorrow. Indeed, most of what is hoped for these days is no more than some slightly modified version of the present, if not simply the return to a status quo ante — to a present that only recently became deceased. This is the utopia of normality, evinced by the drive to “get everything running back to normal.” In this heroically banal vision of the world, all the upheaval and instability of the last few years must necessarily appear as just a fluke or bizarre aberration. A minor hiccup, that’s all. Nothing to write home about. Once society gets itself back on track, so goes the argument, it’ll be safe to resume the usual routine.

Those for whom the present of just a short time ago already seemed to be charting a disastrous course, however, are compelled to imagine a still more remote past: a past that humanity might someday revisit, after completing its long journey through the wilderness of modernity. Having lost its way some centuries back, this would signal an end to the hubristic conceit that society can ever achieve self-mastery. Humanity’s homecoming, in this model, is much like that of the prodigal son’s. Never again will it wander too far afield. From this time forward, it will stick to the straight and narrow. This would spell an end to that feeling of “transcendental homelessness” described by the young Lukács. Simultaneously, it would cure humanity of that desire the German Romantic poet Novalis claimed was expressed by philosophy — i.e., “the urge to be at home everywhere.”1

Neither of these ideal temporalities, whether oriented toward the present or the past, is entirely what it seems, however. How so?

For one thing, the present (at least, the present of the last two hundred or so years) is never fully present. It’s always getting ahead of itself, lunging headlong into the future, outstripping every prognosis and expectation. But no sooner has its velocity increased

---

than it finds itself right back where it started. Just as swiftly as the present speeds itself up, it feels the ground beneath it begin to shift: a cycloinear running in place, as it were. The ceaseless proliferation of the new now presents itself as the eternal return of the same old, same old. Novelty today has become quotidian, if not wholly antique. It thus hardly comes as a shock that Marxian theorists like Moishe Postone have described the peculiar treadmill effect that occurs under capitalism.\(^2\) History of late may be going nowhere,\(^3\) but it’s going nowhere faster.

The idea of a prelapsarian past, of the “good old days” before everything went wrong, proves just as problematic. Not by chance does the imagery used to depict this past often contain certain biblical overtones. Make no mistake of it: this is Eden before the Fall, the paradise of a blinkered naïveté — those carefree days before humanity dared to taste the fruit of knowledge. Trying to locate the precise moment at which things took a turn for the worse is trickier than it looks, however. As suggested earlier, this past stands at a far greater remove from the present than the chain of presents that expired not too long ago.\(^4\) Its reality recedes into the mists of prehistory. Upon closer inspection, moreover, it soon becomes clear that by its very logic this must be a far more glacial, unchanging past than anywhere in fact existed. For insofar as the “future” (in the robust sense) is conceived as the possibility that historically given conditions can be radically transformed — that there is a τέλος toward which humanity might progress — it is necessary that this past preclude it. This is a past that has been hermetically sealed off from such eventualities. In other words, it is a past that prevents the future from ever presenting itself.

---


\(^3\) “If it did not come to end in 1989, as conservative critic Francis Fukuyama expected, this is because, in Hegel’s sense, as freedom’s self-realization in time, History had already ceased. Long before the new geopolitical configurations and institutional forms of the post-Soviet world, a new and unprecedented, though scarcely recognized, political situation had taken shape: The last threads of continuity connecting the present with the long epoch of political emancipation were severed.” Leonard, Spencer. “Going it Alone: Christopher Hitchens and the Death of the Left.” *Platypus Review.* (№ 11: March 2009). Pg. 2.

So on the one hand, there is the present that constantly chases after the future without ever arriving. On the other, there is the past that is nowhere presently available, which must, furthermore, maintain a safe distance from the present, due to the latter’s continued romance with futurity. If all this is true, however, what ever became of the future? What does it mean to say that one day, in history, the future ceased to exist?

**The Futureless Present**

These are the questions the Italian autonomist and media theorist Franco “Bifo” Berardi seeks to address in his latest book, *After the Future* (2011). Berardi’s provocative thesis is that “the future is over.” By this he does not mean the future in terms of “the direction of time” — as that which will transpire subsequent to the present. Rather, he understands it as a sort of *mentalité*: “the psychological perception…, which emerged in the cultural situation of progressive modernity,” based on “cultural expectations that were fabricated during the long period of modern civilization.”

Tracing a line of thought that leads from Marinetti’s famed *Futurist Manifesto* in 1909 to the grim proclamation of “No Future” by the pioneers of punk rock, Berardi asserts that the 1970s witnessed the final crisis of faith in the modernist promise of a better future. While it enjoyed a brief resurgence around the turn of the millennium (paralleling the rise of the Internet), the futuristic ambitions that emanated from this encounter were soon dashed by the dotcom crash, the wave of military interventions following September 11th, and the global economic downturn after 2008. The prevailing mood of technophilic optimism gave way to despair.

Central to Berardi’s interpretation in *After the Future*, of course, is his contention that this idea of the future is itself historically constituted. That is to say, the newfound sense that humanity stood on the brink of a radically new and unprecedented age had emerged alongside the rapid development of the forces of production that took place at the dawn of the modern period. As such, this feeling was closely allied to the concept of progress, which had just then begun to acquire currency. Each of these concepts — progress, as

---


6 On the dotcom crash: *ibid.* , *passim*, pgs. 80-82; on September 11th: *ibid.*, *passim*, pgs. 12-13, 78, 95; on the global economic downturn: *ibid.*, *passim*, pgs. 71-73, 75, 139-143.
Figure 2 — “No Future” poster, Dublin (photo by William Murphy, July 2009)

Figure 3 — “No Future is the New Future” poster (designed by Hannes Beer of 306/365 for #Occupy, November 24th, 2011)

Figure 4 — Still of the Paris skyline featuring the Eiffel Tower from Chris Marker’s post-apocalyptic masterpiece, *La jetée* (1962)
well as the future humanity would thereby attain — only became possible with the advent of modernity.\textsuperscript{7} This vision of the future (which, as Bifo observes, now merged with prior categories of utopia)\textsuperscript{8} thus owed in no small part to “the considerable speeding up of the pace of social change.”\textsuperscript{9}

At this point, the eschatological “world to come” prophesied by religion was divested of its supernatural character, descending from the clouds of heaven above to find its place on the solid ground of earth below. The celestial became terrestrial. Utopia was torn out of its conceptual “nowhere” in the brains of philosophers and transplanted into political programs for the here-and-now. Neverland left the pens of novelists and fell within the scope of the not-so-distant future. The absolutes of religion, philosophy, and art became worldly. Modernity removed these ideals from the timeless space of eternity, projecting them onto the temporal horizon of the future. Bifo is therefore correct to specify:

The rise of the myth of the future is rooted in modern capitalism, in the experience of expansion of the economy and knowledge. The idea that the future will be better than the present is not a natural idea, but the imaginary effect of the peculiarity of the bourgeois production model…In the second part of the nineteenth century, and in the first part of the twentieth, the myth of the future reached its peak,…based on the concept of “progress,” the ideological translation of the reality of economic growth. Political action was reframed in the light of this faith in the progressive future. Liberalism and social democracy, nationalism and communism, and anarchism itself…share a common certainty: notwithstanding the darkness of the present, the future will be bright.\textsuperscript{10}

\textsuperscript{7} “Progress opened up a future that transcended the…predictable, natural space of time and experience…The future contained in this progress is characterized by two main features: first, the increasing speed with which it approaches us, and second, its unknown quality.” Koselleck, Reinhart. “On the Relation of Past and Future in Modern History.” Translated by Keith Tribe. \textit{Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time}. (Columbia University Press. New York, NY: 2004). Pg. 22.

\textsuperscript{8} “The idea of the future is central to the ideology and energy of the twentieth century, and in many ways it is mixed with the idea of utopia.” Berardi, \textit{After the Future}. Pg. 17.

\textsuperscript{9} “The decisive threshold had been passed when change began to be ascertainable and measurable by the scale of an individual lifespan; when in the course of a single individual life the change was evident enough to demand a drastic adjustment of cognitive and moral standards. Then it was duly reflected in the new and novel sense of history as an endless chain of irreversible changes, with which the concept of progress — a development which brings change for the better — was not slow to join forces.” Bauman, Zygmunt. \textit{Socialism: The Active Utopia}. (Routledge. New York, NY: 2010). Pgs. 18-19.

\textsuperscript{10} Berardi, \textit{After the Future}. Pg. 18.
This hoped-for future would thus seem to have been the outcome of a specific historical experience. Any disruption to this experience, if possessed of a sufficient magnitude or duration, threatened to undermine this futuristic orientation. Just as the future historically came into existence, so might it also historically pass out of existence.

Such an event, according to Bifo’s account, finally occurred in the decade after 1968. This coincided with the crystallization of neoliberal capitalism. Berardi singles out 1977, somewhat idiosyncratically (though doubtless self-serveingly), as marking “the year of passage beyond modernity.” Here a number of factors — deregulation, doubts as to the prospect of unlimited growth, and the dismantling of the welfare state — converged so as to bring the modern epoch to its dismal (and decidedly unheroic) conclusion. With the passing of postwar modernism amidst the breakdown of Fordist models of state-centric capitalism, the bright future to which it once aspired dimmed. “Moderns are those who live time as the sphere of a progress toward perfection, or at least toward improvement, enrichment, and rightness,” Berardi explains. “Since the turning point of the century that trusted in the future — which I like to place in 1977 — humankind has abandoned this illusion.” The society of the present has for several decades now been “post-futurist,” as the title of his book implies, existing literally after the future historically came and went. The world as it could be has today been collapsed into the insurmountable confines of the world as it is: “The promise is over. The era of post-future has begun.”

---

11 For Bifo, the year 1977 is significant for a variety of reasons. It’s about as close as he comes to the Hegelian idea of the world-historical event. This year saw the brief flowering of the Italian autonomia movement, which grew out of its apparently earth-shattering revelation that “the personal is political.” It is a bit odd attaching such significance to this date; compared with 1917 or even 1968, 1977 was a flash in the pan. In terms of Berardi’s biography, however, 1977 serves as something of an origin myth: everything that came before is understood as leading up to it, everything that came afterward as being shaped by it.

Large sections of After the Future are lifted, almost unedited, from earlier collections like The Soul at Work: “1977 is a turning point in the history of humanity; it is the year when a post-human perspective takes shape.” Berardi, Franco. The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy. Translated by Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia. (Semiotext(e). Los Angeles, CA: 2009). Pgs. 93, 111, 113-114, 175.

12 Berardi, After the Future. Pgs. 17, 44-49.

13 Ibid., pg. 25.

14 Ibid., pg. 164. Bifo concludes with a rather uninspired “Manifesto of Post-Futurism,” pgs. 165-166.
Of course, the “post-futuristic” world heralded by Berardi is only the latest in a long line of “posts” that have accumulated the last few decades. These typically assume the form of prefixes appended to various nouns and adjectives. Most of the time, though, the “transcendental signifier” undergirding all these terms (to use the parlance favored by this discourse) is “postmodernism.” Unsurprisingly, it is Berardi himself who draws the connection between postmodernism and the present age of post-futurism. He notes that 1977, the date he associates with the death of the future, was also “the year that Jean-François Lyotard wrote *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, in which he analyzed the new organization of knowledge and the disappearance of the grand narrative of progressive modernity.” Despite the earnest efforts of those who, like Slavoj Žižek and Jason Schulman, have recently come out “in defense of grand narratives” (even as “lost causes”), Bifo upholds Lyotard’s dictum of “incredulity toward metanarratives.” He thus rejects out of hand every attempt to construe history as the progressive unfolding of human emancipation.

Regrettably, the theoretical and practical framework that Berardi adopts in *After the Future* proves far less interesting than his overarching claim that the future has ended. His theoretical exposition of the problem of post-futurist society is extravagant, jargon-laden, and dense. Berardi’s vague (if not outright baffling) gestures toward a practical

---


solution — which recommend, e.g., a secularized “translation” of “the Christian concept of ‘resignation’,” “poetry and therapy (thera-poetry),” “radical passivity” through “active withdrawal,” even “suicide” — are likewise disappointing.21 Ben Lear has quite aptly dubbed Berardi’s political outlook “lifeboat communism.”22 These deficiencies may be bracketed for the time being, however. Leaving aside these unfortunate ventures into the realm of theory and exasperated appeals at the level of practice, the first thing that must be acknowledged about his thesis is its basic accuracy. On this score there is little room for doubt. The radiant future envisioned by past generations has today all but vanished from sight, disappearing into the neverending gray on gray of the existing state of affairs. In its place looms the disturbing image of a futureless present, which swallows up every possible alternative to conditions as they currently obtain. As Adorno once remarked of Huxley’s dystopia, here “the future bows before the omnipotence of the present.”23

Bifo relies heavily on categories borrowed from other philosophers, which appear at once underspecified and conceptually overwrought. For instance, the hazy concept of “semiocapital,” introduced by Baudrillard several decades back, shows up frequently side-by-side with thought-figures of Deleuzoguattarian origin (“schizoanalysis,” “the baroque,” “deterritorialization,” “rhizomes,” “chaosmosis”) that are no less opaque. On “semiocapital,” see Berardi, After the Future. Pgs. 35, 55, 90, 93-94, 99, 106-107, 114-115, 132-133, 139, 143-144, 150, 156. On “schizoanalysis” and “schizoid” tendencies: ibid., pg. 48, 130, 159, 179; on “the baroque”: ibid., pgs. 99-101, 115; on “deterritorialization”: ibid., pgs. 50, 53; on “rhizomes”: ibid., pgs. 40, 48-49, 128; on “chaosmosis”: ibid., pgs. 78, 159-162, 175-176.

Berardi also freely indulges in the coinage of new terms and concepts. He proposes the “cognitariat” of “infolabor” as a “virtual class” that might replace the industrial proletariat as the post-futuristic subject of history. On “cognitive labor,” “cognitive workers,” “infolabor,” “neuromobilization,” and “cognitariat” (or “cognitive proletariat”), see ibid., pgs. 36, 55, 80, 82, 83-87, 89, 92, 102, 129-131, 144, 163, 170.


22 “Bifo’s politics could be described as a kind of ‘lifeboat communism.’ As the crisis ripples, mutates, and deepens, Bifo sees the role of communism as the creation of spaces of solidarity to blunt [its] worst effects. Gone is the demand for a better world for all, the liberation of our collective social wealth, or the unlocking of the social potentials of technology. Rather, Bifo’s politics are based around insulating a necessarily small portion of society from the dictates of capital.” Lear, Ben. “Lifeboat Communism: A Review of Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi’s After the Future.” Viewpoint Magazine. May 18th, 2012.

From this perspective, then, it would appear that Peter Frase’s article on “Four Futures” this last winter is misguided, on the simple grounds that it posits four futures too many.24 There is precisely no future to be hoped for at present. Closer to Berardi’s position by far are Salar Mohandesi and Asad Haider in their piece, “Is There a Future for Socialism?” Mohandesi and Haider maintain that “revolutionary politics does not occur in the future tense — it’s not a state of affairs to be established.” Cribbing a line from Lyotard, they prefer instead to speak of “the future anterior: the real movement, the current activity of the proletariat which will have been the basis for the transformation of society.”25 This is, as the authors freely admit, old hat. It harkens back not only to The German Ideology, which they explicitly cite, but more immediately to some of the more famous passages of Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History.”26 But Mohandesi and Haider rely too heavily on the account it provides of German Social-Democracy, and read Adorno’s critiques of progress and the Enlightenment one-sidedly. In their haste to assimilate Frankfurt School critical theory to the practical armature of Italian operaismo,27 they commit a number of sloppy logical and factual errors along the way. As a result, though their essay represents a welcome corrective to inevitabilist philosophies of history (in which the future victory of revolution is supposedly “guaranteed”), it falls well short in other respects.

24 Though to be fair, Frase only really discusses two futures qua futures — i.e., as substantial departures from the present. Insofar as what he calls “rentism” (hierarchy + abundance) and “exterminism” (hierarchy + scarcity) already exist throughout most of the world, these would just be continuations of the present. But this is quibbling. Frase, Peter. “Four Futures.” Jacobin. Winter 2012. Pgs. 27-34.


27 As hinted at by their repeated offhand endorsements of Mario Tronti’s “strategy of refusal.”
The vision that most nearly approximates Berardi’s post-futurist world can perhaps be found in Max Ajl’s reflection, “Planet of Fields.” In this terse antiurban tirade, he indicts modern industrial capitalism as “an economic system premised on limitless growth.”\textsuperscript{28} Ajl deploys the ecological motif of “unsustainable” development, a line of argumentation that has become increasingly fashionable in recent decades (ever since the publication of the Club of Rome’s influential study, \textit{The Limits to Growth}). Indeed, Bifo highlights this theme of the \textit{exhaustibility} of material resources as one of the chief factors supplanting expectations of unlimited future abundance. “Exhaustion plays no role in the imagination of modernity,” he writes.\textsuperscript{29} Even Marx, claims Berardi, could not conceive of a world in which the end of capitalist society had been brought about by sheer energy depletion.\textsuperscript{30} Ajl and Berardi describe this danger in virtually identical terms. Ajl: The present rate of growth is sustained only by “temporal theft, in this case from the future.”\textsuperscript{31} Berardi: “The capitalist dynamic is based on a perpetual process of investment in a borrowed future.”\textsuperscript{32} (If this rhetoric sounds familiar, however, that’s because it is — read any of Ron Paul’s rants on “deficit spending” as “a tax on future generations”).\textsuperscript{33}

At first blush, one might easily get the impression that Ajl’s article gives evidence of renewed concern with the future, with all its talk of the disinherited generations to come. It soon becomes clear, however, that the only way the author thinks humanity can survive is for it to reinstate the \textit{past}. Against bourgeois society’s “ceaseless drive to urbanization, industrialization, and capital- and input-intensive agriculture,” Ajl follows Colin Duncan in stressing “the centrality of [‘low-impact’] agriculture.” He thus counterposes an order founded upon a more modest, traditional agrarian model to the megalopolitan nightmare-

\begin{itemize}
  \item Ajl, Max. “Planet of Fields.” \textit{Jacobin, Winter 2012.} Pg. 25.
  \item Berardi, \textit{After the Future.} Pg. 45.
  \item “In the Marxist account of capitalism there is no place for the concept of limits to growth.” \textit{Ibid.}, pg. 46.
  \item Ajl, “Planet of Fields.” Pg. 25.
  \item Berardi, \textit{After the Future.} Pg. 74.
\end{itemize}

Worse still, Ajl tries to treat this as a moral issue, arguing that “the notion of limitless growth encourages a presentist morality.” Ajl, “Planet of Fields.” Pg. 26.

He almost advocates an ethical consumerism, urging readers to change their “patterns of consumption.” If only changing the world were as simple as changing one’s shopping habits. \textit{Ibid.}, pg. 25.
Figure 5 — Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* (1919), an “exercise in the…music of the future” [«экзерсис…музыки будущего»]” (Trotsky)

Figure 6 — Lebbeus Woods’ *Wave House* (1997): “We can know the future to exactly the same extent that we can know the past or imagine the present…having been invented.”
city of the last couple centuries.\textsuperscript{34} In order to carry out this neo-Neolithic revolution, Ajl calls for a policy of “repeasantization” — a telling slip-of-the-pen.\textsuperscript{35} Presumably, what he means by this is not literally the restoration of some sort of \textit{peasantry}, as this feudal title tends to imply a certain legal and political status: enserfment, congenital bondage to the land (the manor or estate of a local nobleman), and the compulsory alienation of one’s property and labor to his lord as part of a \textit{corvée} system. Most farmers are not peasants. Rather, what Ajl probably has in mind is a new \textit{yeomanry}, tilling the soil in the bucolic splendor of the countryside. Although he insists that “smallholder agriculture is not an antiquarian curio,” the spirit that animates Ajl’s atavistic vision is clearly conjured out of the ideological ectoplasm of romantic anti-capitalism.\textsuperscript{36} It is nourished on “the view that if only capitalism had not come into existence we could all be living in a \textit{happy hobbit-land} of freed peasants and independent small producers.”\textsuperscript{37}

This would perhaps seem a neat bit of buffoonery — a quaint throwback to the petit-
\textit{bourgeois} socialism dismissed in the \textit{Manifesto} as “reactionary and Utopian”\textsuperscript{38} — were it not for the widespread support it enjoys in anti-capitalist circles today. The idyllic past it portrays is, of course, a fiction. Family farming has since the 1970s become fetishized by the “small is beautiful” Left, roughly around the same time as family-owned farms began to go extinct (transformed into subsidiaries of large-scale agribusiness). Leftish urbanites and self-proclaimed student radicals today often see in traditional agriculture the vestiges of a simple, honest, and upright way of life that has otherwise been lost in modern times.

\textsuperscript{34} That is, one that is “centered on agriculture,” against Mumford’s megalopolis. \textit{Ibid.}, pgs. 25-26.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid.}, pg. 26.


It is almost certain, however, that this is what Ajl had in mind when he spoke of “repeasantization,” as he goes on to praise Cuba for its reforms.

\textsuperscript{36} Ajl, “Planet of Fields.” Pg. 26.

Seldom is it remembered that in former times the provincial homestead was a bastion of conservatism and bulwark of the ancien régime, home to ignorance, illiteracy, patriarchy, superstition, and the domestic slavery of women. Not for nothing did Marx and Engels contemptuously refer to it as a haven for “the idiocy of rural life.”

**SENIILITY AND THE POST-FUTURIST PASSÉ**

In the absence of any viable future, the gaze of all humanity turns impotently toward the past. What emerges from such inauspicious times as these is thus a renovated passéism, in which the only imaginable society other than the one which presently endures must be seen as reminiscent of its earlier incarnations. Instead of forging a way forward into the great unknown, into an as-yet-unseen social formation, the only path that presently seems feasible for humanity is to flee into the familiar comfort of a new dark age. Even Ajl’s “Planet of Fields” is just one step removed from Zerzanite primitivism. To their credit, Mohandesi and Haider explicitly reject this latter-day form of Luddism, reasserting the

---


Thus did Louis de Bonald, the French reactionary cleric, exalt the “essentially monarchical” character of the agricultural family over the radical republicanism of the urban sans-culottes: “Everything improves the intelligence of the farmer and lifts his thoughts towards Him who gives fruitfulness to the earth, dispenses the seasons, and makes the fruit ripen. Everything debases the intelligence of the worker.” Bonald, Louis de. “On the Agricultural Family, the Industrial Family, and the Right of Primogeniture.” Translated by Christopher Olaf Blum. *Critics of the Enlightenment: Readings in the French Counter-Revolutionary Tradition.* (ISI Books. Wilmington, DE: 2004). Pg. 109.

“Neither Joseph de Maistre nor still less Chateaubriand or Lamennais was the real fountainhead of the anti-democratic thought of the last century. That responsibility is beyond doubt de Bonald’s, with the clairvoyance of hatred and the cold fanaticism of a scholastic theologian gone astray in the modern world.” Koyré, Alexandre. “Louis de Bonald.” Translated by Leonora Cohen-Rosenfield. *Journal of the History of Ideas.* (Volume 7, № 1: January 1946). Pg. 56.


42 “Technology and industrial production are part of our world — they’ve constituted our present, and contrary to primitivist delusions, the present contains open possibilities.” Mohandesi and Haider, “Is There a Future for Socialism?”
openness of the present. Ajl, by contrast, addresses the primitivists’ challenge only *en passant*, obliquely brushing it aside on the grounds that nomadic hunter-gatherer society could never support a large population. And yet the Zerzanites can be said to possess at least one undeniable, if somewhat dubious, merit — the extreme lucidity with which they express their madness.

Nor are their views all that far off from those of somebody like Berardi, who at least nominally still considers himself a Marxist (although Italian *autonomia* has always been known for its colorful heterodoxy). Abandoning all hope for a future beyond capitalism, Bifo retracts many of the stances he held during the 1970s, succumbing to catastrophism à la Baudrillard. Berardi no longer sanctions any form of political engagement; rather, he preaches *disengagement* through “withdrawal.” “Withdrawal means creation of space where solidarity can be rebuilt,” he writes, “and where self-relying communities can start a process of proliferation, contagion, and eventually, of reversal of the trend.” As with the primitivists, there is no future to strive after — there is only the present to wait out.

Toward the close of *After the Future*, Bifo examines the trend toward “senilization” in Europe and evaluates its political potential. He takes the aging European population as an antipode to the futurists’ youthful bravado and ferocious anti-geriatric disquisitions: from David Burliuk’s “everyone’s young young young, infernal hunger in the stomach” to Vladimir Maiakovskii’s “I have not a single gray hair in my soul.” Berardi embraces postmodernist senility over modernist juvenility, speculating that the older generation of

---

43 Ajl, “Planet of Fields.” Pg. 25.

44 “When the code becomes the enemy, the only strategy becomes catastrophic.” Berardi, *After the Future*. Pgs. 137-138.


46 “The age of senilization is here, and Europe is the place where it will first develop.” Berardi, *After the Future*. Pg. 155.


Europeans may even act as the “subject” of history in helping overthrow capitalism.⁴⁹ He goes so far as to champion a “senile utopia” founded on the principles of exhaustion and “UnGrowth.”⁵⁰ “[T]he process of senilization may open the way to a cultural revolution based on the force of exhaustion,” Berardi ponders, “of facing the inevitable with grace, discovering the sensuous slowness of those who do not expect any more from life than wisdom — the wisdom of those who have seen a great deal without forgetting, who look at each thing as if for the first time.”⁵¹

Bifo here can almost be seen winking at the Spartacists, as if to confirm the judgment they passed years ago on his post-workerist contemporaries, Hardt and Negri, whom they pathologized as symptoms of “the senile dementia of post-Marxism.”⁵² But Berardi is far from the only one to find fault with the youthful exuberance that some display toward the future. “The modern infantilization of politics goes along with…a constant orientation of politics towards the future,” the art historian and ex-Situationist T.J. Clark despondently writes in an article that appeared this last April, “For a Left with No Future.”⁵³ In his Aeschylean appraisal of the twentieth century (i.e., his “tragic perspective”),⁵⁴ the Theban tragedy of the last hundred years presents no discernible rhyme or reason — no “shape or logic [as] a development from past to future.” For Clark, it instead contains only “a false future entwined with a past.”⁵⁵ But while Clark is refreshingly circumspect and honest in

⁴⁹ “The senile generation of Europe may become the subject of a cultural revolution to prepare Western society for…the redistribution of wealth and resources. Such a cultural revolution should start with a critique of the energetic juvenilism permeating modern culture.” Berardi, After the Future. Pg. 157.
⁵³ Clark writes, with exaggerated causticity: “‘Future’ exists only in the stock-exchange plural.” Clark, T.J. “For a Left with No Future.” New Left Review. (№ 74: March-April 2012). Pg. 72.
⁵⁴ “…our catastrophe…our Thebes…the seventy years from 1914 to 1989…” Ibid., pg. 60.
⁵⁵ Ibid., pg. 61.

Insofar as his claim is that the revolutionary legacy of the twentieth century cannot be redeemed, Clark’s gloominess is no doubt justified. The twentieth century opened up no fresh avenues for emancipation; its legacy, rather, is the failure to redeem those avenues that had been opened up by the nineteenth: “The 20th
Figure 7 — Étienne-Louis Boullée’s Projet de cénotaphe à Newton, vue en élévation (1784): The progress of science immortalized: Radical bourgeois architecture and Enlightenment

Figure 8 — Illustration from Hugh Ferriss’ Metropolis of Tomorrow (1929): “A huge, ever-growing, pulsating brain that rules from the centre of the Ultraworld” (The Orb)
his willingness to investigate the historical defeats of the Left, he at times slides into an unmistakable defeatism. Clark revels in the futility and irrelevance of the Left to such a perverse degree that he suggests building an entire politics around it:

> There will be no future...because there will be no future; only a present in which the Left (always embattled and marginalized, always — proudly — a thing of the past) struggles to assemble the “material for a society” Nietzsche thought had vanished from the earth. And this is a recipe for politics, not quietism — a left that can look the world in the face.

So here, once again, the catchphrase of “no future” makes an appearance. Clark gives no indication that his usage in any way derives from Berardi’s; it seems to be an independent discovery. Žižek, in his gloss on Clark’s essay, “Signs from the Future,” has no difficulty making out its obvious limitations, but seeks to salvage what he considers its basic “grain of truth”: the Left’s excessively “futural” bent, a charge from which he does not exempt Marx himself. The rest of Žižek’s piece, however, is rather uneven. He oscillates from a loosely Benjaminian position to the “tragic” worldview espoused by Clark (and Hegel, moreover, Žižek maintains). Early on, he encourages his readers to interpret recent world events as the fragmentary “signs of the future” alluded to in the title of his article. Later, Žižek suddenly shifts gears. He accuses Marx of hypostatizing transient features from his century, the period of the emergence, crisis, death, and memory of Marxism, cannot...be redeemed...[T]he language of redemption...in the Second International doesn’t apply in the 21st century. The reason that the 20th century cannot be redeemed is that, unlike the 19th century,...the 20th century was one of unnecessary suffering...because the failure of Marxism was unnecessary, which is why it cannot be properly forgotten.”


56 Clark criticizes “Marx, Raspail, Morris, Luxemburg, Gramsci, Platonov, Sorel, [and] Pasolini” as part of a “tradition...[that is] indelibly...unwilling to dwell on the experience of defeat?” Clark, “For a Left with No Future.” Pgs. 57-58. This characterization is, however, demonstrably false of many of the figures who are named.

He adds later that “[modernity] should learn — be taught — to look failure in the face.” Ibid., pg. 69.

57 Ibid., pg. 75. Clark’s emphasis.

58 Though he refers to Clark’s argument as a “simplified bleak vision,” he endorses some of its sentiments: “Clark sees the reason for [the Left’s] inability to act in [its] ‘futuralism,’ in its orientation towards a future of radical emancipation; due to this fixation, the Left is immobilized...[T]he problem with Marx (as well as with the 20th century Left)...was not that Marx was too utopian in his Communist dreams, but that his Communism was too ‘futural.’” Žižek, Slavoj. “Signs from the Future.” July 25th, 2012.
age and mapping them onto the future, amplifying all the beneficial aspects of capitalism while shedding the detrimental ones. Hence, Žižek argues, “we should return from Marx to Hegel.”  But the irony of this statement cannot possibly escape him: Hegel, perhaps more than any other thinker, is blamed for rationalizing the fickle realities of his milieu (Metternich, Lutheranism, the Prussian state).

The post-futurist passé has less to do with the past, however, than it does with the senility of a forgotten future. Such glittering images of the past, the make-believe worlds of a bygone age, are simply placeholders for the future that once was. “Today the past is dead,” Fredric Jameson declared in 1982. “As for the future, it is for us either irrelevant or unthinkable.” But under what kind of conditions would the (re)imagination of the future become possible again? Passéism today is a product of the senescence of the Left, of a world trapped within the stunted temporality of the permanent present.

MEMORIES OF THE FUTURE
Murmurings can still be heard, intimations of the world that had been promised, recalling a time when there actually was a future. These linger on, increasingly muted and hushed, refracted throughout the echo chamber of history. Somewhere in the background one still hears the faint crashes of La Marseillaise and L’Internationale; the notes all run together. The cry of “Liberté, égalité, fraternité!” rings through the ages, but it has fallen on deaf ears. This project of emancipation clearly belongs to the past, separated from the present by an almost unbridgeable amnesia. Counterintuitively, access to this future can only be gained through an extraordinary act of memory.

59 Žižek treats these “signs of the future” as “limited, distorted…fragments of a utopian future which lies dormant in the present as its hidden potential.” His criticism of Marx runs as follows: “The problem with Marx (as well as with the 20th century Left)…was not that Marx was too utopian in his Communist dreams, but that his Communism was too ‘futural’…[W]hat Marx conceived as Communism remained an idealized image of capitalism, capitalism without capitalism, i.e., expanded self-reproduction without profit and exploitation.” Ibid.


61 Of course, this future cannot be recovered, still less realized, by an act of memory alone. Being able to imagine a better world than that of the present in no way guarantees that it will come to pass.
Several years back, an odd injunction was thus issued: “Remember the future!” What this meant was parsed as follows:

In order to recognize [the] outstanding problems of capital we must remember the future whose horizons of possibility informed the politics of the best traditions of revolutionary Marxism. Despite the limitations of Marxism as an historical movement, we nevertheless remain within the horizon of the history of capital and its social effects, whether politics today recognizes it or not. Hence, apparently paradoxically, it is by recognizing the horizons of possibility of capital as revealed in the past that we may recognize the limits humanity needs to overcome to realize its potential, emancipated future.62

Incidentally, this is how Marx related to his own political moment in 1852. Reflecting on his bitter disappointment with the 1848 revolutions, and now faced with the long night of reaction that had set in, he observed that the bourgeois revolutions draped themselves in the garb of the past. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, this repetition had become farcical.63 Marx invoked the memory of the French Revolution of 1789, whose ambitions had been so much loftier than those of his day, in order to add that “[t]he [modern] social revolution…cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future.”64

Besides Berardi, there have been others who have detected the post-futurist character of the present. Like him, they have registered the passing of the future in recent decades. Unlike him, they are not convinced that it is time to just have done with it, and maintain that humanity cannot wipe its hands of the future once and for all. The gateway to the future resides in the past, and must be sought there.

This is the task undertaken by the English architectural critic Owen Hatherley in his tour de force debut, Militant Modernism. In its opening lines, Hatherley goes over some of the difficulties involved in “retracing” the development of the modernist movement, whose stated goal was to abolish its own necessity:

63 “Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce. Caussidière for Danton, Louis Blanc for Robespierre, the Montagne of 1848 to 1851 for the Montagne of 1793 to 1795, the nephew for the uncle.” Marx, Karl. The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. Translated by Clemens Dutt, et al. Collected Works, Volume 11: 1851-1853. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1979). Pg. 103.
64 Ibid., pg. 106.
Figure 9 — Crystal Palace fire, 1936 (built 1851): A souvenir, the memorialization of the future in flames

Figure 10 — Tsentrosoiuz building, by Le Corbusier, Pierre Jeanneret, and Nikolai Kolli (1928), photo by Max Semakov, (April 2009)

Figure 11 — NCSR, by Ivan Fomin (1929), photo by Max Semakov (April 2009)
Erase the traces. Destroy, in order to create. Build a new world on the ruins of the old. This, it is often thought, is the Modernist imperative, but what of it if the new society never emerged? We have been cheated out of the future, yet the future’s ruins lie about us, hidden or ostentatiously rotting. So what would it mean, then, to look for the future’s remnants? To uncover clues about those who wanted, as Walter Benjamin put it, to “live without traces”? Can we, should we, try and excavate utopia?

Here again, the key to the future redemption of humanity is indexed by its historic past. “The phrase ‘erase the Traces’ comes from Brecht,” Hatherley continues to explain. “Yet …socialism, though it wants to create a new society, ‘lives in traditions,’ as Leon Trotsky put it. It remembers the defeats, the failed attempts, and with revolution, it enters a world ‘already familiar to us, as a tradition and as a vision.’” The tradition referenced here, via Trotsky, is none other than what Marx meant by “the tradition of all the dead generations, [which] weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.” The future beyond capital can only be achieved by overcoming the present’s subjugation to the past — i.e., “capital vis-à-vis living labor,…the rule of past, dead labor over living labor.”

Corresponding to this circuitous chronology, Hatherley writes: “Brecht’s and Eisler’s syncopated ‘mass song’ remembers the pile-up of failures, brutalities, and corpses that is politely called history, yet harnesses the memory of those defeats for the purposes of a different world. ‘Forwards! Not Forgetting,’ it implores.” A fitting apothegm in a time that has forgotten its future.

Hatherley is not alone in calling for the excavation of utopia. Jameson’s overview of past utopias, Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions, proposes a similar course of action. Both make use of Benjamin’s short 1932 rumination on “Excavation and Memory,” in which the mnemonic process is likened to

---

67 Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon. Pg. 103.
an archaeological dig into a “buried past.”71 For Hatherley, the primary sites that must be excavated are ruins — and more precisely, ruins of the future.72 Ruins, as the infamous Nazi architect Albert Speer maintained in his “theory of ruin-value,” inspire a certain awe in those who behold them. They appear to belong to an epic past.73 They appear to belong to an epic past.74 Hatherley recounts the way he experienced the derelict Brutalist structures of Reyner Banham’s Britain, the last gasp of modernist utopianism after the Second World War. At least empirically, the most memorable aspect of these encounters, he confesses, was an overwhelming sense of “nostalgia for the future, a longing for the fragments of the half-hearted postwar attempt at building a new society, an attempt that lay in ruins by the time I was born.”75

There is, undoubtedly, the danger of lapsing into a facile retro-futurism at this point: a vision of spacecraft in sepia, the yellowed pages of avant-garde magazines. Fortunately, Hatherley is not particularly given to sentimentality. One of the more intriguing subtexts to his aside on “nostalgia for the future,” however, is the way he inverts the post-Soviet literary theorist Svetlana Boym’s Future of Nostalgia.76 Though he incorrectly interprets it as vindicating postmodernity, Columbia professor Andreas Huyssen ascribes a similar value to ruins as Hatherley in his article “Nostalgia for Ruins,” taking them to be material embodiments of modernist nostalgia. Huyssen there asserts that “we are nostalgic for the

73 Speer stressed the need to anticipate the future deterioration of buildings presently under construction, calculating decay into their design in order to enhance their apparent venerability. Hatherley incisively diagnoses Speer’s mania: “[O]ne is reminded of the interesting element to Albert Speer’s otherwise utterly banal ‘Theory of Ruin Value’[:]…Rather, the psychotic, suicidal notion of building with the ruins already in mind: a death-drive architecture, where posterity’s opinion is internalized to such a ludicrous degree that…the corpse has been designed before the living body.” Hatherley, Militant Modernism. Pg. 49.
75 Hatherley, Militant Modernism. Pg. 8.
76 Boym also uses ruins as a metaphor for memory and nostalgia, but she is less perceptive on this score. She ends up unconsciously (and therefore, eo ipso, uncritically) repeating Speer’s doctrine: “The ruin is not merely something that reminds us of the past; it is also a reminder of the future, when our present becomes history.” Boym, Svetlana. The Future of Nostalgia. (Basic Books. New York, NY: 2001). Pg. 79.
ruins of modernity because they still seem to hold a promise that has vanished from our own age: the promise of an alternative future.”

The intuitive sense of injustice that Hatherley alluded to, the feeling of “having been cheated out of the future,” is thus hardly unique to him. Hidden in the otherwise freakish sideshow of the Republican primaries this past winter, there would seem to have been a slim sliver of truth — a truth concealed in the opportunistic campaign slogans and Super PAC fundraisers of Romney and Gingrich: “Restore Our Future” and “Winning Back Our Future,” respectively. Obama’s campaign from four years ago, despite its many promises of “hope,” “progress,” and “change,” was implicitly built on comparisons to MLK, JFK, and FDR (i.e., three figures from the past). But then again, who today can be bothered to remember all the unkept promises and cynical electioneering of just four years ago?

IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME
Over a century ago, Marcel Proust embarked in search of lost time. The lost time of the present is somewhat different from the lost time of Proust’s day, however. Today it is not only the past coded in the present that goes unrecognized. Even more than that it is the scattered remains of past futures whose horizons have yet to be surpassed.

“Our world, like a charnel-house, lies strewn with the detritus of dead epochs,” wrote the architect and archmodernist Le Corbusier in 1924. What if it is the present epoch, however, which is today dead? The memorabilia of past ages point to a future that never came: Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky’s Taylorized kitchen, Georgii Krutikov’s flying cities, Mikhail Okhitovich’s ribbon patterns of settlement, El Lissitzky’s call for an “interstellar revolution” and “the conquest of gravity,” Corbusier’s own proposals for “exact air” and “sun control.” In the world that did emerge — the world of “now we know better” — all these now assume the form of utopian kitsch. But against the future they projected, even the most daring futures presently imagined appear pallid by comparison.

Perhaps Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter were right after all. It may well be that, as they wrote in their co-authored classic, Collage City, the second half of the twentieth century

78 Cutrone, Chris. “Obama: Three Comparisons — The Coming Sharp Turn to the Right.” Pg. 2.
79 Le Corbusier. The City of Tomorrow and Its Planning. Pg. 231.
saw utopia’s final “decline and fall.” At least with Rowe and Koetter, this observation is tinged with regret. It is no cause for celebration. As Jameson put it in his 2003 article “Future City,” at present “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.” Since writing this line, it has been quoted ad nauseam (and even misattributed to Žižek and Mark Fisher). But Jameson himself seems to be aware that he was simply paraphrasing something Adorno had recorded in 1956: “The horror is that for the first time we live in a world in which we can no longer imagine a better one.”

In a “future” installment (assuming there even is one) it will be necessary to write the history of the future. Not simply to catalogue them as relics for display in the museum of the past, but rather as forgotten premonitions of the world that might still someday come. Not as the passing fancy of the present, a fleeting source of amusement in an unchanging world — but as a reminder to all that this world can be changed.

---

82 In her recent meditation on William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, “The Future, Probably,” Laurie Penny makes the point that the apocalyptic disposition of the present may just be wishful thinking. Against the doomsayers, she warns of the shortsightedness inherent in their “refus[al] to see the future in anything other than the shapes of smoke rising from rubble.” Penny, Laurie. “The Future, Probably.” *The New Inquiry*. April 25th, 2012.