

# **Professional Anarchy and Theoretical Disarmament**

**On Insurrectionism**

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*“We are certain that communities of joy will emerge from our struggle here and now.”*

Alfredo Bonanno, *Armed Joy*

For the last ten years or so, Spain’s superannuated libertarian milieu has been convulsed by an anarchist current whose activities have led to a change of perspective with regard to the approach to revolutionary action. Restricting its critique to tactical questions and ignoring all else, its contributions have not been numerous. The real conditions of the present time, beginning with the absence of major struggles, the non-existence of a workers movement and an anarchist milieu in decline, were not the most favorable circumstances in which the insurrectionist proposals for action could break with the pacifist spectacle of the social pseudo-movements that have lately begun to proliferate. The “insu” sabotage actions have been viewed by the unconscious masses as something alien and foreign to them, which made the job of repressing them so much easier. But we would be erring on the side of severity if we were to fail to recognize in the impulse that lies behind these actions an authentic will to struggle and an intelligence that was more effectively proceeding towards the radical critique of existing conditions than that of the other modern libertarian currents, of the primitivist, green, communalist, municipalist, etc., varieties. This is already reason enough to address the question of the insurrectionist current and engage in a critical review of its main postulates.

To begin with, insurrectionist anarchism seems to be very closely connected with the figure of Bonanno, its main exponent, although he does not hold any official positions in the movement, nor does he perform any informal leadership functions; he is only represented in the movement by the force of his personality. While it is true that his opinions and actions also provoke hostile criticism and disagreements between the groups, and that there have also been other important “theoreticians” such as Constantino Cavallieri, his role in the genesis of the tactics that characterize insurrectionism and his influence on the majority of its activists are indisputable. Bonanno is a veteran anarchist with extensive experience and a public enemy of domination whom the state has treated to various trials and prison terms. He has published many writings that allow us to get a clear idea of his ideas, which are in any event not at all complicated or original; by his background and character he has always viewed the least significant philosophical reflection as what he calls “metaphysics”, which should not be at all surprising since the real Bonanno has been an agitator and a man of action first and only secondarily an analytic and clear thinker. Our intention will be to detect the appearance of insurrectionist ideas and follow his development by means of an account of his experiences and personal career, exercising due methodological caution, and insisting on the fact that Bonnanism is not all there is to insurrectionism.

Alfredo Maria Bonanno was born in Catania (Sicily) in 1937, the son of a relatively well-off family. We know nothing about his first thirty years; his first writings that we know of date from 1970 and are concerned with atheism and the “autonomy of the rank and file productive nuclei”. A text from 1971 speaks of “counterpower”, which indicates “operaist” influences that could have come from either Negri or the Spontaneist-Maoist organization, “Potere Operaio”. “Operaism” was a critical Marxist current that during the sixties played

more or less the same role in Italy that “Socialisme ou Barbarie” played in France, bringing theoretical renovation to the ranks of the libertarian milieus. Bonanno also carried out translations of classics like Rudolph Rocker and the not-so-classic Gastón Leval. When the waters of Italian anarchism began to be stirred as a result of May '68 and the strikes of the “hot autumn” of 1969, our protagonist was already familiar enough with anarchist ideology to unequivocally position himself “on the left” in a generational debate. The young libertarians did not want to limit their actions to propaganda and proselytism; they wanted to effectively participate in the real struggles, in order “*to contribute to the growth of revolutionary anarchist consciousness in the masses*”. The organization of the glorious elders and their followers was more concerned with its meetings and congresses than with struggles and only aspired to “*gather as many people as possible under one acronym or one flag*”, and was not concerned so much with “*attacking power as with trying to cause it the least possible disturbance in order to continue to utilize the tiny spaces where its struggles took place or where it indulged in illusions about its struggle*”. It was therefore “*a movement that served as a custodian of a patrimony of ideas, analyses and specific experiences, but it has no direct relation with the struggles that are currently underway*” (Bonanno, “**Fictitious Movement and Real Movement**”). A morass of organic accords and procedures allowed a small bureaucracy of officials to paralyze any initiative that was not consonant with the official line, which is why the question of the organic proceedings was the main *casus belli* that pitted the old immobilized militants against the new generation of activists. The Italian Anarchist Federation was organized on the basis of an “associative pact” that had been composed by Malatesta himself. As an organization “of synthesis”, there was room in it for anarchists of all tendencies, but not all tactics, since the latter were conveniently determined at the congresses, where “*tiny vacuous power centres*” controlled, judged, condemned or absolved minority views. The young anarchists advocated a flexible structure of “affinity groups”, without a program, rules or committees, or any unifying bond other than individual autonomy and personal responsibility. Critical of the trade unions, they promoted the idea of small rank and file organizations independent of any political or trade union structure, such as, for example, the Autonomous Movement of Railroad Workers of Turin, as the optimal means of intervention of anarchists in the struggles. Bonanno proclaimed: “*We are advocates of organization.... but organization cannot become a self-sufficient thing, isolated from the struggle, an obstacle that must be overcome before gaining access to the arena of the class war.*” The most important question that divided the old and the young libertarians, however, was that of revolutionary violence. At that time the Italian bourgeoisie was experimenting with terror, and the problem of violent response arose, and the armed struggle or violent attacks were merely aspects of that problem that were impossible to ignore. The proprietor-militants of the FAI not only avoided participating in such debates; they attempted to isolate anyone who even suggested they were necessary by means of calumny and underhanded machinations. The point was finally reached where what bound the young libertarians to the FAI was completely overshadowed by what alienated them from it, so that it did not take long for splits to develop. In 1969 the breaks began; there were impatient militants who joined Lotta Continua or Potere Operaio, while others founded the Federated Anarchist Groups and published “A Rivista Anarchica”, which was for many years the tribune of the “alternative”

anarchists. An interesting contribution of this current was its critique of the “technobureaucracy” and the new “managerial” capitalism, plagiarized from John Burnham’s “Managerial Revolution”, which Bonanno noted and would regurgitate in later works. A third current was formed by those who were inspired by the Platform of Arshinov and Makhno, like the French ORA, advocating an even more strict, and especially more vanguardist, organization, one that would be the guardian of the principles of a zealously defended anarchism.

Even aside from the splits, however, the main problem of the FAI beginning in 1968 seems to have been the impact of situationist ideas, the true solvent of the stereotyped militant slogans and anarchosyndicalist and anti-Marxist discourse that served as the foundation for a stagnant and paralyzing ideology, incapable of engaging in a unitary and radical critique of the new class society within which the struggles against a renewed Power had to orient themselves. The Situationist International, which had an Italian Section, had in its last years embodied the figure of “historical evil” for the proprietors of the FAI, the ideologues of a particular kind of anarchism that was perfectly compatible with a modernized class society. The tension between these proprietors and a dissident sector in a state of constant unrest that accused them of bureaucratism and ideology and that advocated a critique of everyday life, spoke of workers councils or advocated violent methods, provoked a paranoid defensive reflex among the proprietary layer of the FAI. The FAIista bureaucrats thought they had been infiltrated by mysterious situationist agents and reacted by convening a congress, the FAI’s tenth, held in Carrara on April 10, 1971, which was specifically devoted to combating the phantom of the S.I. The congress voted to exclude the “anarcho-situationists” in order to prevent their example from spreading to the local groups and federations. The insignificant FAI, obsessed with what was nothing more than the antibureaucratic effects of the first stage of proletarian autonomy, remained blind to the real danger, that of the manipulation of the libertarian movement by the secret services of the Italian state. For the fascist bombings of Milan on April 29, 1969 and at the Piazza Fontana on December 12, 1969 were attributed by the police to the anarchists. One anarchist, Giuseppe Pinelli, was thrown from the window of a police station and another, Pietro Valpreda, was chosen as the patsy who would take the fall for the bombings. The affair transcended the scope of the libertarian milieu and shook all of society. Tempers were further inflamed in May 1972 when the anarchist Franco Serantini was beaten to death by the police at a demonstration and the police chief Calabresi, who was responsible for the death of Pinelli, was executed by a commando squad a few days later. The FAI, alarmed by the events, did not hesitate to distance itself from the violent responses to repression by condemning the attacks and the bombings directed against the police and the judiciary. Bonanno, who had condemned the bombing at Milan one year earlier, took a diametrically opposed position in which, in the pages of “Sinistra Libertaria”, a publication that he edited, in an article in his name entitled, “**I Know Who Killed Chief Superintendent Luigi Calabresi**”, he exhibited a sense of humor and displayed a degree of courage that in October 1972 earned him two years and two months in prison for writing an “apology for crime”.

We have to believe that he read a lot while in jail because in 1974 he published some pamphlets about the state, abstentionism and revolution. At this stage of his career he believed that he had already decisively crossed a threshold in his thought, publishing at his

own expense a thick anthology entitled **“Self-management and Anarchism”**. During the next few years he would continue to print copies of this book, which was assembled according to the cut-and-paste method (the book was also published in a Spanish edition), while he continued writing his articles for the bi-monthly theoretical journal “Anarchismo”, which he had founded in Catania. He justified the rejection of the dialectical method because it went hand in hand with “authoritarian” forms of thought that corresponded with authoritarian forms of action (**“Economic Crisis and Revolutionary Opportunity”**). Marx is not even useful to Bonanno as a critic of the economy because his thought is philosophical, Hegelian, and therefore “reeks of metaphysics”. Allergic to the terminology of philosophy, he goes so far as to define the Marxist oeuvre as “*a program that has its roots in the Protestant mysticism of the Middle Ages*” (**“After Marx, Autonomy”**), which could be considered a matter of opinion if it were not for the fact that not only did Protestantism have nothing to do with mysticism, it did not even exist in the Middle Ages. Bonanno would always have the problem of having to say something about everything, whether he knew anything about it or not, and quite frequently ridiculous errors would crop up in his extensive catalogue of works. He could have easily noted the role played by classical German philosophy in the development of revolutionary thought by taking the example of Bakunin, an unrivalled exponent of the influence of Hegel. Bonanno’s critique of trade unionism repeated what was already known since May ’68: “*Old-style capitalism has given way to a new managerial version. It is perfectly well aware that its best friend and ally is the trade union.*” (**“A Critique of Syndicalist Methods”**, 1975). So far he says the same things as the councilist Marxists (he quotes Pannekoek), but he only directs his criticism at the libertarian trade unions. He does not focus, however, on the workers councils, assemblies, committees and other forms of horizontal coordination because Bonanno is not interested in the working class “in itself”, but only in the way that anarchism can be articulated in its self-organization. The anarchists do not have to inject their ideas in the masses from the outside, by way of propaganda: “*the revolutionary anarchist project starts from the specific context of actual struggles.... [it] cannot be the product of the minority. It is not elaborated by the latter inside their theoretical edifice, then exported to the movement in one block or in pieces (...)* it is necessary to start from the actual level of the struggles, from the concrete, material level of the class combat by constructing small autonomous rank and file institutions capable of occupying the point of convergence between the total vision of liberation and the partial strategic vision that revolutionary collaboration renders indispensable” (**“Fictitious Movement and Real Movement”**). In 1975 Bonanno thought (correctly) that Italian society was passing through a pre-revolutionary phase, and that what was fundamental was the autonomous organization of the workers, for which they needed “*autonomous rank and file nuclei*”, or “*autonomous workers nuclei*”, which were none other than “*small autonomous base organisations dedicated to the radical struggle against the present structures of production*” (**“A Critique of Syndicalist Methods”**). These nuclei were supposed to constitute the point of intersection between the anarchists and the proletariat. He did not trust any more broad-based structures like the workers assemblies because they restricted the autonomy of the groups and could easily be manipulated by bureaucrats and demagogues.

He was not very specific about intermediate steps until a qualitative leap in social conflict placed the question of armed struggle on the agenda.

During the mid-seventies the Italian state had been seriously weakened and had revealed its frailty by its resort to the stage-managed terrorism that designated fictitious enemies, with the complicity of the communications media and the Stalinists. Attempts to restructure industry aggravated the social revolt, which spilled over from the factories into the streets. In the words of Bonanno, *“the revolutionary movement, including the anarchists, was in a phase of growth and anything seemed to be possible, even the generalization of the armed conflict”* (**“Armed Joy”**). The existence of a militarized party like the Red Brigades provoked the fear among the denizens of anti-authoritarian milieus that the Red Brigades would assume leadership of the struggles. The debate on armed libertarian alternatives led in 1977 to the birth of Azione Rivoluzionaria, *“a combatant structure that is as open as possible to the rank and file”*. The critique of arms, *“the only force that can make any project credible”*, according to Azione Rivoluzionaria, now reached such levels that confrontations arose, no longer just in the FAI (which, more interested in syndicalism than in the revolution, obviously condemned the armed struggle), but among the revolutionaries themselves. For some, what was taking place was a separate violence that did not work in favor of the class confrontation but of the spectacle of confrontation, contributing to the criminalization of *“the movement of autonomy”* and provoking its repression. For Azione Rivoluzionaria, the movement would never have been taken seriously and never would have been seriously feared if it were not for the armed groups. It was logical that the repression would fall upon the revolutionary offensive whether or not there were any armed groups, but thanks to the fact that the latter became the lightning rods for the repressive apparatus, the movement could still retain its offices, its journals and its radio stations. Bonanno’s response took the form, first, of his text **“Movement and Revolutionary Project”**, followed by the book, **“Armed Joy”**, which had a major impact at the time due to the fact that it not only violated the taboos of the militant lifestyle, but even more importantly, due to the fact that its publication was soon prohibited (in the Bologna area about three thousand copies were sold or given away). A Spanish edition was also published. The book contains no significant analyses, nor does it seriously discuss the topic of armed struggle: it is not a book of strategy but one of principles. Its novelty did not reside in its contents, which were borrowed from the work of the group *“Comontismo”* (1972–1974) and from the writings of the former situationist Raoul Vaneigem, *“Terrorism and Revolution”* (1972) and *“From the Wildcat Strike to Generalized Self-Management”* (1974), which had a major impact in Italy, but in the fact that it gathers together and discusses in a facile manner suited to a broad public all the themes that could interest rebels who did not like reading too much and those for whom the revolution is not unlike a kind of generalized open bar. Despite a few disdainful words that he devotes to May ’68, his language is pro-situ: the revolution is a festival, you never have to work again, self-management is the self-management of exploitation, the struggle is pleasure, the game is a weapon, destruction of the commodity, etc. The word spectacle is repeated dozens of times, while references to the state, which would be more appropriate for an anarchist text, are few. In one section Bonanno claims, using Vaneigemist language, *“to oppose the non-work aesthetic to the work ethic”*. Although not long before he had been agitating for the

“autonomous organization of production”, now *“the only way for the exploited to escape the globalising project of capital is through the refusal of work, production and political economy (...) The revolution cannot be reduced to a simple reorganisation of work ... The revolution is the negation of labour and the affirmation of joy.”* Despite the fact that he had devoted an entire book to the idea that the expropriated should re-appropriate the totality of the productive process, that is, self-management, now he condemns it as a mystification: *“If the struggle is victorious the self-management of production becomes superfluous, because after the revolution the organisation of production is superfluous and counter-revolutionary.”* If one were to look for an outline of a strategy or simply some practical ideas to help deal with the immediate problems of the revolution that were reaching a critical stage in 1977, one would not find them in this book; the whole thing is one long expression of mystification, even with regard to the armed struggle. Besides expressing his satisfaction with the violence that was being directed against police, employers and mainstream journalists, and saying, *“hurry to arm yourself”*, he warned against the sanctification of the submachine gun, since the armed struggle *“cannot represent the revolutionary dimension”*. In any event, the armed struggle was unquestionable, since any critique directed against it would redound to the benefit of *“the torturers”*: *“When we say the time is not ripe for an armed attack on the State we are pushing open the doors of the mental asylum for the comrades who are carrying out such attacks....”* And nothing more: an appeal to enjoy life and leave the armed groups in peace while the Italian proletariat confronts the dilemma of whether it should abolish work or continue working. Bonanno, in the pages of *“Anarchism”*, noted the generalization of illegal behaviors and the pre-revolutionary trend of the time, but the guerrilla organization Azione Rivoluzionaria published ironic comments about the purely literary character of the stance of the *“critical critic of Catania”* who *“finally wants to specify the precise nature of the revolutionary tasks of the anarchists. Given his premises we would expect a response of this type: the anarchists will have to begin to rebel. But this is not at all what he says: the anarchists have to encourage the exploited to rebel. If we were to interpret this maliciously, it means: the same old song and dance, the Leninists, the Stalinists, and the workerists rebel; but why do the anarchists limit themselves to encouraging others to rebel? Who will encourage the encouragers, then? Will they not once again find themselves outside of history? Or a more benevolent interpretation: encourage the exploited to rebel in the only way possible, that is, by rebelling, and not with rivers of ink....”* (Azione Rivoluzionaria, **“The Movement of 1977 and the Guerrilla”**). A general strike did not take place, leaving the armed groups and the unrealistic elements like Bonanno increasingly more isolated. Although the receding of the movement of 1977 left the armed struggle as the only way out for many rebels, they did not constitute the ten, one hundred, or one thousand armed cells that Azione Rivoluzionaria announced in its founding manifesto. The trade unions imposed order in the factories and the police imposed order in the streets. The state was reinforced and illegal behavior was harshly repressed. Waves of arrests followed; the armed struggle dissolved like a sugar cube in water. In 1979 most of the members of Azione Rivoluzionaria were in prison and from their cells they delivered the coup de grâce to the guerrilla movement, some of them joining the Leninist organization Prima Linea, which gave rise to doubts concerning the ideological stability of Azione Rivoluzionaria, which had been so resoundingly proclaimed

in the group's leaflets and communiqués. In late 1977 Bonanno was arrested because of his book, "Armed Joy", and condemned on November 30, 1979 to one and a half years in prison for what he had written. Instead of being scared straight or repenting, however, he fraternized with the activist prisoners, even with those of the Red Brigades and P38, publicly denouncing Amadeo Bertolo and Paolo Finzi who, from the pages of "A Rivista Anarchica" had roundly condemned his review of a book about Emile Henry. It was the first time that he had been publicly attacked in the pages of an anarchist journal and they made sure to remind him of his exhibitionism when he spoke at meetings. Bonanno took advantage of the occasion to address the question of class violence without indulging in suspicious moralisms: *"The terrorist is not the person who confronts power with violence in order to destroy it, but the person who employs violent and cruel means to assure the continuance of exploitation. For this reason, since it is only a small minority that has an interest in this continuance (employers, fascists, politicians of every stripe and flavor, trade unionists, etc.), it can be logically deduced that the 'real' terrorists are the latter elements, insofar as they employ violent means to perpetuate exploitation. And the violence of these people is carried out by way of the laws, in the prisons, in the compulsion to work, in the automatic mechanism of exploitation. The rebellion of the exploited is never terrorism."* (**"On the Terrorism of Certain Imbeciles and Other Matters"**, 1979). By identifying the determining factors with the extreme forms of oppression, he identified the latter purely and simply with terrorism: *"We shall note that the terrorist must be the person who terrorizes another person, who tries to obtain something by imposing his point of view with actions that sow terror. It is therefore clear that power terrorizes the exploited in a hundred ways. The exploited are afraid they cannot find work, they are afraid of poverty, of the laws, of the police, of public opinion; they suffer from a concentrated form of psychological terrorism that reduces them to a situation of almost total submission in the struggle against power. That is terrorism"* (*ibid.*). Bonanno, however, did not advocate the armed struggle, which was still debatable on the strategic level, much less the need for an "armed party". What he rejected was the absolute juxtaposition, which he considered to be Manichaeic, of the armed struggle and the mass struggle, because this leads to the delegitimization and criminalization of those who engaged in the former. He posed the question but did not resolve it. The armed struggle was therefore a respectable option with which you may or may not agree, but which no guardian of anarchy may excommunicate you from the fold for supporting. It was not all good, nor was it all bad, but it was always ethically justifiable. This theme became his specialty, but he did not stop there. From then on his thought exhibited a disturbing stylistic discontinuity and confusion. Bonanno was suffering from graphomania and confidently tackled any issue, with a sententious tone that reflected an attempt to produce an impression of profundity, and with abundant allusions to convey the appearance of not saying all that he knew; the usual conceits to leave the indiscriminating reader open-mouthed. Facts were rarely mentioned and he hardly ever resorted to their use in order to provide a basis for his peremptory assertions. If he mentioned the "actual movement", it was merely a cliché for his affected rhetoric. He went from one thing to another amidst outbursts, incongruous topics, gratuitous assertions and, now and then, a truth that was half-buried among so many phrases, confecting everything without the least logical connection. The conclusion was the principle: insurrectionist

action. We could provide dozens of examples of his irrationality; but it will suffice to take a look at "**The Baby and the Bathwater**", in which he aspires to liquidate, among other things, his poorly assimilated situationism, the "movement", the dialectic and Marxism. The fact that Bonanno scorned theoretical activity if it did not lead to immediate and forceful action did not spare him from becoming, to use his own words, one of those "aficionados of the pen, who produce analyses the way Fiat produces cars".

In May 1980 the police carried out a raid against anarchists associated with the journal "Anarchism". Bonanno and his comrades were accused of belonging to Azione Rivoluzionaria, but the show broke up in the middle of the presentation of the evidence. The last days of the revolutionary movement unfolded in the presence of a vast number of informers and penitents. Toni Negri himself led the "dissociated", those who promised to never fight the state again in exchange for special treatment in prison, and directed his appeal to the chorus of those who were calling for an amnesty. Bonanno correctly lashed out against all of them in a little book entitled "**And We Will Still Be Ready To Storm The Heavens Another Time: Against Amnesty**", which earned him another trial. From the fact that the revolutionaries were easily defeated he drew conclusions that were diametrically opposed to the conclusions drawn by the surviving anarchist organizations, since his conclusions pointed towards violent action against the persons and the things that embodied repression, bourgeois justice, the technobureaucracy, trade unionism and capitalism, all of which must be "*translated into precise acts, acts of attack, not just verbal, but in the form of deeds*" ("**The Illogical Revolution**", 1984). Real anarchists must be in permanent revolt and must go on the offensive: "*We insistently reassert our conviction that the use of organized violence against the exploiters, even when it takes the form of isolated actions on the part of minorities, is an indispensable instrument of the anarchist struggle against exploitation*" ("**And Us, Etc.**"). After years of beating around the bush, he finally decided to take the plunge. The discussions in prison and the shameful spectacle of the penitents and the dissociated made their contributions to this decision. Bonanno, to whom we should be grateful that he forgot about Spinoza and the "diffuse worker", expressed obvious truths that were fortunately not dissimulated behind his pretentious logorrhea: "*They will not give us an amnesty. We will have to pay for it.*" The price will be the revolutionary spirit, ideas, dignity, courage: "*By accepting the agreement today, tomorrow at best we might perhaps struggle inside the ghetto where power will have parked us ... Collaborating means surrendering to the enemy outright.*" For the extremist Stalinists: "*The reduction of class war to a mere military confrontation carries within it the logical conclusion that, if we undergo a military defeat on this terrain, the class war ceases to exist as such. From this we come to the not just theoretical but practical absurdity that in Italy today, after the defeat of the combatant organizations, there is no longer an actual class war, and that it is in everyone's interest (and in the State's interest first of all), to negotiate a surrender in order to avoid the development, or the continued development, of a process of struggle that is absolutely nonexistent and completely useless as well as dangerous for all of us.*" ("**And We Will Still Be Ready To Storm The Heavens Another Time: Against Amnesty**" [*op. cit.*]). For the treason of Negri and the collaborators resides in their peculiar Leninism that translates everything into terms of separate power: as the self-proclaimed

representatives of the working class, they were the privileged interlocutors of the state and their salvation was when they whitewashed the central question; the defeated party would not fight to achieve their liberation, but instead sought to negotiate for their liberation in order to resume the struggle with other means. With the future mortgaged by pacts with the state, what kind of struggle could this be? Bonanno astutely pointed out that it was one thing to disarm as a result of a change of opinion, and another to do so because the ruling power demanded it: *"They are inviting us to not be the naughty boys we have always been and to understand the situation. They are inviting us to collaborate."* To the state, no one is innocent: *"We cannot turn ourselves into dwarves now, after having dreamed, elbow to elbow, each feeling the others' heartbeats, of attacking and overthrowing the gods. This is the dream that makes power afraid [...] No one can be neutral; we are guilty of the planning and preparation of that climate which filled us with enthusiasm and led us along. Even the most critical of us could not claim perfect innocence. In the eyes of the State, it is precisely this climate that is guilty. We must assume responsibility for this."* (ibid.) But these flashes of lucidity were not enough to shed light on the new panorama of the eighties, with a defeated working class and thousands of prisoners in the jails. In vain do we search his work for a balance sheet of the process that led to this disaster. Bonanno only offers us a reaffirmation: *"In these times of liquidation and stagnation, we reaffirm that our struggle is a struggle for total liberation, now and right now."* Employing a reverse Manichaeism, he opposed the mass struggle to the insurrectionist struggle, because he does not consider the former as a moment in the development of the latter, but as an instrument of the latter: *"For us, intermediate struggles are not a goal but a means that we use (even rather often) to achieve a different goal: that of urging people to revolt [...] The important thing is that intermediate struggles must reach a violent outcome, a breaking point, an essential line beyond which recuperation would no longer be possible...."* To reach this point we need a consciousness of the need to generalize violence and this was the function of the "specific movement": *"we must create the possibility of a specific movement that is capable of encountering the real movement, in places and moods in which the latter's pulse becomes perceptible to the former."* (ibid.) Insofar as this logorrhea makes any sense, it sounds bad: the masses were incapable of attaining revolutionary goals without the existence of an elite, let us call it the "specific movement", or else their "intermediate" struggles will never attain the necessary insurrectionist level. Bonannist anarchism was crystallizing into a vulgar adventurist and vanguardist ideology, quite similar in its theoretical foundations to the militarist extremism of the "armed party". Over the next few years Bonanno would elaborate the essential concepts of the insurrectionist ideology on the basis of the separation between the mass struggle and the insurrectionist struggle, a separation that only a select, "specific" minority can help to overcome. His work began to be known outside of Italy and he became a notorious figure for international anarchism. His great theoretical discovery—that any kind of action, no matter how minoritarian it may be, was possible and desirable at any time—infallibly marked the way forward for him.

In the beginning was the deed. The separation between theory and practice reduced the former to a simple accompaniment and the latter to a mere technique. For Bonanno, the "refusal to wait" exhibited by the "specific" anarchist organizations and the "transition to action"

required a different type of organization, one that was not permanent, defined as “informal”, and he thought he found such an organization in the affinity groups. These groups will have to elaborate a “project” that is the product of their analyses and discussions, which would provide orientation to the groups and be a stimulus for action. Utilizing the technical jargon of business marketing, in one of his articles in “Anarchism”, he described this project as “*the place where theory is converted into practice*”, specifying the four preconditions *sine qua non* for its elaboration that must be united in the revolutionary, that is, courage, persistence, creativity and “materiality” (something like a practical sense). A meeting held in Milan in 1985, organized around the theme of “Anarchism and the Insurrectionist Project”, allowed Bonanno to expound in broad strokes his vision of the transformations that had taken place in capitalism. The flippancy way he brandished trivialities that had been made fashionable by American sociology (such as, for example, defining society as “post-industrial”), and the professorial tone he employed that so rapidly lost its charm, were quite shocking. In the transcript of his speech we may read this monstrosity: “*the capacity of capital from the productive point of view is not based today on the resources of finance capital, that is, on investments and money, but is instead based essentially and almost in its totality on intellectual capital.*” Although it might seem like a lie, Bonanno repeated what professor Negri was saying. “*Capital no longer needs to resort to workers to carry out production*” since “*the main focus of the working class has been moved elsewhere. At first, timidly, in the sense of a diffusion of the factory in the territory [Negri again]. Then more decisively, in the sense of a gradual replacement of the classic secondary productive processes by the tertiary ones.*” One has to ask oneself if he knows what he is saying, since the tertiary processes have nothing to do with production, but the Bonannist prose has always been a tortured prose, especially when used for theoretical purposes. According to him the working class is being progressively sidelined from production, thus forfeiting its leading role and, furthermore, the revolution is just as likely to take place as not to take place because in the post-industrial society the relation of cause and effect between the struggles and their consequences has disappeared. Yet without giving a reason, he says that, “*it is for precisely this reason that the revolution becomes possible.*” Bonanno had heard of the revolts in the marginal neighborhoods of the cities of England and gratuitously pontificated on the task of the anarchists: “*to transform the irrational situations of the uprising into an insurrectionist and revolutionary reality.*” The matter was set aside *sine die*, but we have already said that theory was not his strong point and because he had to regularly write copy for two publications, he unscrupulously operated on the basis of pirated materials. In 1987, he copied the format and typographical features of the journal, “Encyclopédie des Nuisances” for the new series of “Anarchism”, which would be an innocent anecdote if not for the fact that he published three articles from the EdN in each of his publications, which featured undisclosed deletions, abusive interpolations, arbitrary revisions and numerous errors without any apparent purpose, which forced the EdN to publish a communiqué that concluded: “*Those who, exhibiting a critique that is not their own, begin by dissimulating its origin to the best of their abilities, as well as concealing the struggles from which this critique emerges and the relations that these struggles imply, thus demonstrate that they are incapable of using it and discovering the secrets of their epoch or understanding the diverse special operations of spectacular*

*democracy. Where fiction dominates the big picture, petty falsifications can have no importance. However, we avail ourselves of the opportunity to declare our modest conviction that these falsifications explain the triumph of the fiction on the large scale, and that the overthrow of the latter passes through the end of the former.*" Such trivialities were of no concern to Bonanno. His problem was, on the one hand, the "attack", and on the other, the attempts on the part of the police to implicate him in various terrorist incidents.

Bonanno was the first agitator since Blanqui to proclaim the possibility of an offensive against Power during a period when the working class was in full retreat. This evidently involved an attempt to escape from historical determinations by way of the decisive actions of minorities. The leading role, according to Bonanno, fell to the informal groups, the only ones that are capable of carrying out serious action. Such revolutionary revolts were not for the masses. He condemned mass demonstrations as useless pacifism and proposed instead, together with demonstrations "*organized in the insurrectionist way*", "*the need for small-scale destructive actions of direct attack against the structures of capital.*" The groups must assume full responsibility for these attacks and they must not be contingent on favorable or unfavorable circumstances, or on the general level of consciousness. The decision to directly attack Capital and the state involves only the revolutionaries, who are the guardians of the insurrectionist essence of the conflict: "*We either attack or retreat. We either completely accept the class logic of the confrontation as the irresolvable and irreducible contrast or else we go backwards, back to negotiations, details, linguistic and moral confusion.*" If they want to live their lives, liberate their instincts, negate bourgeois ideals, satisfy their authentic needs or any other trifle of the liberated vocabulary of dissatisfied rebels, words are not enough. Each anarchist has to overcome the political and moral barriers that prevent him from engaging in action. Bonanno characterized these efforts as "*the great project of liberating the new man from ethics*" ("**The Moral Breaking Point**", in "Provocazione", a publication he edited, March 1988). He scorned assemblyist methods because they delayed or prevented more resolute actions, as well as initiatives that sought to obtain the maximum number of supporters, which he referred to as "the mania of quantity". This is why he paid no attention to the workplace-based demands of such rank and file movements as the COBAS, formed in November 1987. The Bonannist model was the "self-managed leagues" that were formed during the early 1980s by the inhabitants of Comiso (Sicily) to oppose the construction of an American missile base. These groups were composed of informal "nuclei" under the guidance of anarchists whose sole objective was the destruction of the military base, without any program, autonomous (independent of parties, trade unions or any other bodies), in "permanent conflict" with domination and engaged in "permanent offensive", without engaging in dialogue, transactions or agreements. It was certainly in order to distinguish these struggles from the struggles that were not immediately oriented to destruction, that he called the latter type of conflict "intermediate struggles", unlike the other kind that had more extensive goals that were motivated by "the work of insurrection" such as the "struggle against technology", which resulted in more than one hundred high tension electric power pylons being dynamited between 1986 and 1988. The translation of a German pamphlet that provided details on how to destroy one of these pylons earned Bonanno another stay in prison. In this campaign against the construction of new high voltage power

lines, in which rebels from various countries participated, the mania for quantity returned via the back door: the trade unionists counted membership cards and the activists counted attacks. The quantitative spirit ruled all. But the efficacy of an attack does not depend on the number of explosions, or the amount of destruction caused. There are no “intermediate” struggles as opposed to real struggles; there are practical struggles and useless struggles, struggles that awaken the consciousness of oppression and struggles that cause it to go to sleep. The police were unable to implicate Bonanno in any violent acts but they cunningly managed to implicate him in a robbery at a jewelry store. He was arrested on February 2, 1989 and released without charges being filed against him two years later. Once he was released he took advantage of the opportunity to travel to Spain and provided the finishing touch to insurrectionism, an ideology that has been influential in the anarchist milieu of various countries where anarchism was stagnant, dormant and controlled by cliques.

In 1992 Bonanno and some of his comrades proposed to make a qualitative leap forward in the “offensive” by setting up an “organizational opportunity”. Towards this end they formed the group to promote the constitution of an Anti-authoritarian Insurrectionist International. The word, “Insurrectionist” made its debut at this time. In January 1993 he went to Greece and spoke at two conferences at the Universities of Athens and Thessalonica in which he explained, “why we are insurrectionist anarchists”. What follows is the insurrectionist ideology summarized in six points:

*“Because we consider it possible to contribute to the development of struggles that are appearing spontaneously everywhere, turning them into mass insurrections, that is to say, actual revolutions.*

*“Because we want to destroy the capitalist order of the world which, thanks to computer science restructuring, has become technologically useful to no one but the managers of class domination.*

*“Because we are for the immediate, destructive attack against the structures, individuals and organisations of Capital and the State.*

*“Because we constructively criticise all those who are in situations of compromise with power in their belief that the revolutionary struggle is impossible at the present time.*

*“Because rather than wait, we have decided to proceed to action, even if the time is not ripe.*

*“Because we want to put an end to this state of affairs right away, rather than wait until conditions make its transformation possible”*

[From “**The Insurrectionist Project**”, 1998.].

The organizational conception, the elements of which had been gradually formulated during the course of the previous twenty-five years, would complete the ideology. Bonanno restricted himself to inserting it into a descriptive label that many people would not agree with. “The insurrectionist revolutionary anarchist organization” consists of affinity groups formed

on the occasions of struggles “for the purpose of carrying out precise actions against the enemy” and “creating the best conditions for a mass insurrectionist uprising”. The insurrectionist character is conferred by the “permanent state of conflict”, that is, by the knowledge of being at war against capitalist and state oppression. These groups are based on “rank and file nuclei”, an old Bonannist idea, whose function “is to replace, within the arena of the intermediate struggles, the old trade union organizations of resistance” on a terrain composed “of what remains of the factories, the neighborhoods, the schools, the social ghettos and all those situations in which class exclusion is manifested”. For Bonanno it was the destructive aspect rather than the degree of consciousness provoked in the masses that establishes the standard by which the effectiveness of an action is judged. It goes without saying that the preferred form of action is sabotage, “the classic weapon of all the excluded” (“**Another Turn of the Screw for Capitalism**”), valid for all occasions and suitable for all ages. Sabotage is like desire, which has no schedule or dates on the calendar.

The analyses of social reality still comprise Bonanno’s weak spot. He asserts the non-existence of a “factory mentality” and refers to the “de-skilling” of the individual, as well as the “pulverization” of the working class, which is why he considers any references to “ridiculous dichotomies such as that between bourgeoisie and proletariat” to be unfounded, only to immediately proceed to similar dichotomies derived from vulgar sociology: “specific social reality ... always has one constant: the division of classes between dominators and dominated, between included and excluded.” The dichotomies do not stop there, either, since he alludes to “the conflict between rich and poor countries” which takes the form or tends to take the form of national liberation struggles or wars of religion. This confrontation, caused by the inability of capitalism “to resolve the economic problem of the poor countries”, leads him to the discovery of positive aspects in nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism, whose manifestations throughout the Mediterranean lead him to the conclusion that the latter region will be the “theater of social confrontations ... which could soon become generalised”. By reading the newspapers, he convinced himself that he was an expert in geopolitics, since he imperturbably claims to demonstrate that in the Mediterranean countries “conflict[s] worsening the present tensions ... [will take place] over the next few years”; he does not specify whether they will be conflicts between classes or states, most likely they will be both, but in any event these conflicts will have to be confronted with the most adequate practice, that of insurrectionism (“**For an Anti-Authoritarian Insurrectionist International: Proposal for a Debate**”, 1993). In reality, Bonanno is referring to the Palestinian conflict, in which he has placed great hopes. As always, the armed struggle, having risen high enough to obtain a global viewpoint, remains in the clouds of third-worldism.

We say that the revolution in societies based on class antagonism will be carried out by the oppressed masses, rather than by formal or informal minorities. The organization will be the one that is produced by the social struggles, rather than one that is the product of activist voluntarism or propaganda. If the times are not mature this is because there are no conscious mass movements. For a lack of anything better one does what one can, but the absence of massive struggles can never be compensated for by activism on the part of a handful of groups. A strategic defense must consist in organizing the theater of the social war for the purpose of fighting the class enemy. This means liberating spaces for

the development of consciousness in the masses; in other words, for the emergence of autonomous struggles. In a contrary sense, activism not only replaces these struggles but sets itself up as their radical spectacle, which is why, rather than assisting the resurgence of revolutionary protest, it lays the ground-work for its disarticulation. The incredible confusion of the insurrectionist theses was not acceptable, but the inconsistency and superficiality of these analyses never bothered Bonanno, who was possessed by a desire for action that he knew how to transmit to those anarchists disillusioned with the inactivity of the traditional organizations. These anarchists had become followers of his ideas in spite of all logic, since logic was not exactly his most characteristic means of attracting followers. Insurrectionism made headway in certain youth milieus not because of its lucidity or its theoretical superiority. Nor was its impact in these milieus the result of the efficacy of its actions, which were often seasoned with the bitter gall of prison and personal tragedy; much less was it due to its having transformed Bonanno's Mediterranean prophecy into a reality. The reasons for its relative success were of a psychological nature: for those who want action, it gave them action. Action was a kind of emotional discharge. Bonanno had noted that "*anarchism was a tension, not a realisation*" ("**The Anarchist Tension**", speech delivered in Cuneo, January 1995) and insisted on this fact. Bonanno described the attainment of anarchist consciousness as an "*insurrection of a personal nature ... that illumination which produces an idea-force inside us*", a kind of revelation that determined a way of life and not just a way of viewing things. It produced an intimate liberation, the elevation to a state of anarcho-grace which helped one to free oneself from the bonds of the individual's environment: "*insurrectionism is a personal fact; each person must carry out an insurrection within himself, modify his own ideas, transform the reality that surrounds him, beginning with the family and the school, which are structures that keep us imprisoned....*" (**Interview with Bonanno on Radio Onda Rossa**, November 20, 1997). Anarchists, if they really want to be anarchists, must subject everything they do and think to daily examination, since what they do and what they think cannot be separated. Either "metaphysics" or anarchism, that is, action. Action thus acquires an existential dimension. An anarchist without action was like a garden without flowers, or like a soldier without a uniform. How could one stop if one was in a state of "permanent conflict"? Action became a moral criterion: one was a good or a bad anarchist depending on whether one engaged in action or did not. Bonannism, a peculiar version of the American "do it yourself" attitude translated into revolutionary terms, offered all the delights of the sectarian militant's lifestyle without any of its organic servitudes. The absence of real social movements was not a handicap but a precondition for insurrectionism: the illegal nature of its agitation rendered it advisable, for obvious reasons of security, to maintain a certain distance from prosaic labor among the masses. An extreme individualism called "autonomy", supported by a few passages from Stirner, shielded the professional anarchist from all criticism. The insurrectionist could then believe in the ointment regardless of irrelevance or the senselessness of his actions, since, being indifferent to the masses, he does not have to answer to anybody. He was the sole judge of himself. By an irony of history, the elderly Bonanno had survived his contradictions and deficiencies thanks to acne.

The Insurrectionist International met in Athens in the fall of 1996, shortly before or shortly after which Bonanno was imprisoned for belonging to an armed gang. In 1994 the forces

of repression had also come to embrace the cause of action by carrying out arrests and staging media circus trials. "Anarchism" ceased publication, but in "Canenero", published in Florence, the various informal factions of the International briefly reconverged. The insurrectionists had overestimated the revolutionary possibilities of the Mediterranean countries and had underestimated the repressive capabilities of an over-equipped state. The most elementary strategy would have before all else called for posing the question: can insurrectionist practice survive the repression that would be immediately unleashed? Of course not. The Marini trial was the response of the Italian state to the sting of the insurrectionist fly. There were similar responses in Greece and Spain (Bonanno was no Fanelli: insurrectionism made its debut in Spain in 1996 with the fiasco of the Cordoba hold-up). Bonanno was released from prison in October 1997. The disagreements between the various groups were accentuated by the outbreak of the predictable wave of repression. The International met for a second time somewhere in Italy and officially dissolved. Four years later the Marini trial concluded with harsh sentences for most of the defendants. In one way or another, however, the insurrectionists stood their ground and have not forgotten their prisoners. "Offer flowers to the rebels who failed", as Vanzetti said. Our criticisms do not prevent us from recognizing their courage and our disagreements do not constitute an obstacle to our demand for their liberation.

find each other.



Miguel Amorós  
Professional Anarchy and Theoretical Disarmament  
On Insurrectionism  
2007

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