

# Insurrection- ary Anarchism as Activism

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We have translated and published this article by Miguel Amorós for two reasons. First, because it is a historical exposé on the origins of Bonanno-style insurrectionalism. This is of some interest: many of the fans of Bonanno's highly quotable writing seem not to know much about his history. This piece ought to prove informative, and perhaps troubling in parts.

The second reason for publishing this article is that it comprises a thoroughgoing critique of the founding assumptions of the insurrectionalist outlook. This critique of insurrectionalist ideology, of insurrectionalism as ideology, is what truly interests us in the piece, and why it is included in *Attentat*.

Amorós critiques the hidden activist ideology in insurrectionalism through the figure of Bonanno. Bonanno has had significant influence in the US, and all over the world, for that matter, but we are not interested in tracing his influence in particular. What concerns us is the lack of self-critique in insurrectionalist thinking, which affirms all action so long as it may be classed as an attack.

Let us first give credit where credit is due. Like Amorós, though probably from a very different position, we can say that insurrectionaries are perhaps the closest to our own position. That is, we might be doing what they do if we thought there was any chance it would make a difference. That we do not do what they do does not mean we cannot respect their courage and audacity. Consider it warmly acknowledged. Amorós attributes courage and a sense of humor to Bonanno, and we will repeat the gesture: we appreciate many things insurrectionaries in the US have said and done.

That does not mean we are inclined to agree with their analysis.

2

If we are to believe Amorós, Bonanno-style insurrectionalism appeared in Italy and elsewhere through a critique of syndicalist methods. Its autonomous base nuclei are a direct response to practical questions that were to some

extent shared with the older generations of red anarchists and more or less anti-state communists. But beyond such organizational questions (notably the aspect of specifically Bonanno-style insurrectionalism that has had the least impact here) we may also observe a theoretical genesis. Here Amorós is brutal in his critique.

To reduce the critique to a dialectical argument Amorós does not quite make, it was the failure to absorb or properly respond to the negativity of Situationist critiques against the libertarian left that allowed the left to return in a peculiar form, one that still emphasized a very loose form of organization, but above all action and spontaneity. This is what the US milieu has inherited—or interpreted—in the form of “crews” and “attack.”

In the US, the bulk of the current generation of insurrectionary anarchists (in word and deed) transitioned into their current position not out of a milieu of anarcho-syndicalists and anti-state communists, and certainly not in any active debate with urban guerilla partisans, but largely from the activist post-anti-globalization left, the DIY/skillshare subculture of practical anarchy, and the diffuse, prevailing idea of anarchism centered on an unlikely mix of collectives, identity politics, and consensus process.

We would like to ask whether the meaning of insurrection and of insurrectionary approaches varies accordingly.

Amorós praises Bonanno's courage in not backing down after the wave of repression in the early eighties. But he rightly criticizes him for a complete failure of analysis before the circumstances. All Bonanno said at that time was the same thing he had said before. There was no lesson in failure. But his approach seemed more radical, more important—and not only to himself—because others were backing down.

And to the degree that he was saying something, he was unwittingly parroting a diluted vanguardist line. Amorós accurately pinpoints the vague echo of such a line in the commonplaces of insurrectionalism. If the masses were not revolting, it was up to a more advanced group to revolt first. From these ideas, it is not far to say the group that attacks has the consciousness that the masses lack, and that they are not only revolting first but *for* them, so that they may see the open possibility of revolt. The vanguard no longer leads, it attacks first. Is it not still a vanguard? From this we get what Amorós ironically calls Bonanno's great theoretical discovery: that any action that can be undertaken, should be.

For Amorós this motto bespeaks a separation between theory and practice: "The separation of theory and practice reduced one to a simple accompaniment and the other to mere technique." The acts are technique, reduced

to what can be easily done and reproduced. And reproducibility is perhaps what has gotten the US milieu to make the most reproducible acts (window smashing, for example) into its currency.

Amorós calls insurrectionalism “an ideology that had its influence in the anarchist milieus of various countries where anarchism was stagnant, dormant, and controlled by factions.” To whatever degree it has succeeded in the US, then, it is because of these factors: reproducibility (practice as mere technique), and stagnation (theory as accompaniment—the weakness of new anarchist theory in the years when insurrectional writings were gaining traction in the US). Clearly, sadly, one feeds the other.

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Amorós’ critique of this ideology, this pro- “action, any action” approach combined with a weak and separated analysis comes down to saying that its supposition is wrong. “I say that revolutions, in societies of class antagonism, are made by the oppressed masses, not by formal or informal minorities.” We prefer not to take sides on this issue, since we are not sure what is meant by revolution; but the least we can say is that we have yet to see insurrectionary acts be anything more than themselves—anything more than reproducible. Those who imitate them are influenced by the same simplistic ideas. The masses remain motionless.

If North American insurrectionaries were to undertake and explain their actions differently, as something done for their own satisfaction, or from an advocacy of destruction for its own sake, we would no longer consider this critique relevant. But to continue to suggest that revolt will spread because easily reproducible actions do deserve a skepticism like that of Amorós. His critique of the mutated vanguardism of insurrectionalism is that its “activism not only substitutes for such struggles, it also sets itself up as the radical spectacle of such struggles.” We would only say that we are even *more* skeptical, because we have no idea how revolutions are really made, or if a revolution is what we want as opposed to a more comprehensive undoing of the world as we know it. To Amorós’ anti-vanguardist, Situationist-influenced critique, we add our nihilist one: we don’t even know if the conscious masses are possible.

We could therefore call many if not all of US insurrectionary anarchists activists, if only because their adherence to the simple idea of taking action is ideological. That ideology, the faith in action as opposed to waiting (there is a difference between waiting for the masses and waiting because conditions are uncertain), should be called activism, shouldn’t it?

We agree with Amorós when he suggests that what is attractive about such activism is the psychological satisfaction it brings about: those who want action get action.

It is easy to claim that the action was important, relevant, or liberatory after the fact, especially if there is a poorly thought through analysis that helps you to say so. Action is intrinsically meaningful; this is what Amorós calls its “existential dimension.” It is right to act, and wrong not to; this is what he calls action as a “moral criterion.”

5

We became convinced that this text had serendipitously folded itself into our collection when we read the sentence in which Amorós writes that insurrectionary anarchism is a “peculiar revolutionary version of American ‘do it yourself’ [that] offered all the charms of sectarian militancy with none of its organic servitudes.” How funny; how painful; how apt. Because US anarchists know DIY so well, they traded up from collectives, skillshares, and puppets to insurrectionary acts, without knowing that the realness they were reaching for, and would soon be claiming and demanding of everyone around them, was merely a riskier variant of, not a real break with, all of their activism so far.