

Professional
Anarchy and
Theoretical
Disarmament:
On
Insurrectionalism

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*Communities of joy will emerge
from our struggle here and now.
—Alfredo Bonanno, Armed Joy*

For ten years or so, there has existed in this country [Spain] an anarchist current that has stirred up the stagnant libertarian milieu and has brought about a change of perspective in the terms of approach to revolutionary action. If we limit its critique to tactical questions and ignore the rest, its contribution has not been plentiful. The real conditions of the moment (a lack of real struggles, the non-existence of a workers' movement, and an anarchist milieu in decline) were not ideal ones for insurrectionalist action proposals to be able to break through the pacifist spectacle of the social pseudo-movements that have bubbled up recently. The *insu* sabotages have been regarded by the unthinking masses as something alien and external, so that repression has been easy. But we would err on the side of severity if we failed to recognize, in the impulse that has brought them about, an authentic will to fight and an intelligence on a better path to the radical critique of existing conditions than that of other contemporary libertarian currents, such as the primitivist, green, communalist, municipalist, etc. This alone is a sufficient reason to examine the insurrectionalist current and to critically review its main postulates.

First of all, insurrectionary anarchism seems closely connected to the figure of its main exponent, Bonanno,

even though he neither holds an official position in it, nor does he head an informal leadership, nor represents, in the movement, anyone but himself. Certainly, his opinions and actions also give rise to hostile critiques and disagreements among the groups; and there have been other important “theorists” such as, for example, Constantino Cavallieri, but Bonanno’s role in the genesis of the tactics that characterize insurrectionalism and his influence on the majority are undeniable. Bonanno is a veteran anarchist with extensive experience; he is a public enemy of domination whom the State has persecuted with various trials and imprisonments. He has published numerous texts that allow us to understand his thought clearly (it is neither complicated nor original). Due to his education and character, he has always interpreted the slightest philosophical reflection as what he calls “metaphysics”. This should not surprise us; the true Bonanno has always been an agitator and a man of action rather than an analytical and enlightened thinker. My intention here is to seek out the first appearances of insurrectionalist ideas and to follow their development by following Bonanno’s personal experience and trajectory with the necessary methodological precautions—acknowledging that not all insurrectionalism is Bonannism.

Alfredo Maria Bonanno was born in Catania (Sicily) in 1937 to a well-off family. We know nothing of his first thirty years; his first known writings date from 1970 and discuss atheism and the “autonomy of productive base nuclei.” A piece from 1971 deals with “counterpower,” which denotes *operaista* influences that could equally well come from Negri or the Maoist-spontaneist organization *Potere Operaio*. *Operaismo* was a critical current of Marxism, that, in the seventies, played more or less the role that *Socialisme ou barbarie* did in France, taking the renewal of theory all the way down to the libertarian rank and file. He also translated classics such as Rudolf Rocker or the suspect Gaston Leval. When the waters of Italian anarchism began to toss as a result of May 1968 and the strikes of the “hot” autumn of 1969, our protagonist was sufficiently ensconced in ideology to position himself clearly “on the left” in a generational debate. The young libertarians did not want to limit action to propaganda and proselytizing; they wanted to participate effectively in real struggles to contribute “to the growth of revolutionary consciousness in the masses.” The organization of glories past and its followers, on the other hand, were more concerned with meetings and congresses than with the struggles themselves and aspired only to “join the greatest number under one acronym or

banner,” not worried about “attack[ing] Power: [rather] they try to disturb it as little as possible in order to conserve the tiny spaces they find themselves struggling in—or believing they are struggling in.” It was, then, a movement that “has inherited ideas, analyses and very specific experiences, but it does not have any direct relationship with struggles” (“Fictitious Movement and Real Movement,” Jean Weir trans.) [modified to accord with Amorós’ text]. The tangle of agreements and organizational procedures allowed those responsible for a small bureaucracy to paralyze any initiative that deviated from the official line, which is why the organizational question was the main *casus belli* between the immobile older militants and the new active generation. The Italian Anarchist Federation was organized on the basis of an “associative pact” written by Malatesta himself. Inasmuch as it was a “synthesis” organization, anarchists of all tendencies were included, although not anarchists of all tactics, since these were conveniently redirected through the congresses, where “small centers of power” controlled, judged, condemned, or absolved minorities. The youth defended a flexible structure of “affinity groups” with neither program, nor rules, nor committees, nor any criterion of unity other than individual autonomy and personal responsibility. Critical of the unions, they promoted small organizations at the base independent of any political or union structure,

such as the Autonomous Movement of Turin Railway Workers—the ideal means for anarchist intervention in struggles. Bonanno affirmed: “We are partisans of organization. [...] But organization cannot be a thing in itself, isolated from the struggle, an obstacle to be overcome before gaining access to the area of the class clash” (*ibid*). However, the question that most separated the older libertarians from the youth was that of revolutionary violence. At a time when the Italian bourgeoisie was experimenting with terror, the problem of a violent response was impossible to ignore, and armed struggle or attentats were but facets of this problem. The official militants not only avoided getting involved in such debates, but also tried to isolate them, using calumny and manipulation against anyone who suggested that they needed to happen. A moment had arrived in which what brought young anarchists together with the FAI was much less than what distanced them. The splits were not long in coming. The breaks began in 1969; some impatient people joined Lotta Continua or Potere Operaio, while others set up the Federated Anarchist Groups and published *A Rivista Anarchica*, which for years was the magazine of “alternative” anarchists. An interesting contribution that they made was the critique of “technobureaucracy” and the new “managerial” capitalism, a sort of carbon copy of John Burnham’s *The Managerial*

Revolution, which Bonanno studied and popularized in later writings. A third current was made up of those inspired by the Platform of Arshinov and Makhno, like the French ORA, advocating an even more rigid and above all more vanguardist organization, a guardian of the principles of an old and protected anarchism.

However, splits aside, the main problem for the FAI from 1968 on seems to have been Situationist ideas, those true solvents of stereotypical militant slogans and anarcho-syndicalist/antimarxist commonplaces that cemented together a stagnant and paralyzing idea-space, incapable of realizing a unitary and radical critique of the new class society with which to orient struggles against the new form of Power. The Situationist International, which had an Italian section, had ended up embodying the figure of “historical evil” for the officials of the FAI, ideologues of a certain “anarchism” that was perfectly compatible with a modern class society. The tension between the officials and an oppositional sector in constant ferment that accused them of bureaucratism and ideology and that advocated a critique of everyday life, spoke of workers’ councils or defended violent methods, provoked a paranoid sort of defensive reflex among the former. The FAI bureaucrats felt themselves infiltrated by mysterious Situationist agents and reacted by calling for a congress,

the tenth, in Carrara, April 10, 1971, dedicated entirely to combatting the phantom of the SI. The congress decided to exclude the “anarchosituationists” to prevent their example from spreading to local groups and federations. The insignificant FAI, obsessed by what were ultimately just the antibureaucratic effects for the first stage of proletarian autonomy, remained blind before the true danger: the instrumentalization of the anarchist movement by the secret services of the Italian State. Indeed, the police blamed the fascist bombs in Milan (April 29 1969) and Piazza Fontana (December 12 1969) on anarchists. One of them, Giuseppe Pinelli, was thrown through the window of a police station; another, Pietro Valpreda, was chosen as the scapegoat of the attentats. The issue went beyond the libertarian media and had the entire society in a state of tension. To aggravate people’s morale even more, in May of 1972 the anarchist Francesco Serantini was beaten to death by the police at a demonstration, and Chief Superintendent Calabresi, the one responsible for Pinelli’s death, was executed by a commando unit a few days later. The FAI, alarmed by these events, did not hesitate to distance itself from violent responses to repression, even condemning the attentats and bombs against the police and the magistrature. Bonanno, who had condemned the bombing of the Milan Police Command a year earlier, had the opposite attitude, as documented

in the pages of his publication *Sinistra Libertaria*, signing his name to an article entitled “I Killed Chief Superintendent Calabresi.”¹ For this sense of humor and courage, in October of 1972, he was awarded a sentence of two years and two months for “defense of the crime.”

He probably read a lot in the hole, because in 1974 he published some pamphlets on the State, abstention, and revolution. Around this time he seems to have believed he had thrown the decisive weight of his thought on the theoretical scales of justice, compiling an anthology entitled *Self-Management and Anarchism* at his own expense. The following year he had the book printed (and also made available in Spain), made cut-and-paste style while he continued writing articles for the bi-monthly theoretical magazine *Anarchismo* that he had founded in Catania. He justified the rejection of dialectical method on the grounds that it goes hand in hand with “authoritarian” forms of thought that correspond to authoritarian forms of action (“Economic Crisis and Revolution-

1 There may be some confusion here on Amorós’ part. Bonanno was jailed in October 1972 for an article in *Sinistra Libertaria*, but the Milan Police Command was bombed in 1973, so the article in question would have been published later—presumably after Bonanno was free. Additionally, the article Amorós seems to be referring to bears the significantly different title “I Know Who Killed Chief Superintendent Calabresi.”

ary Possibility”). Marx is not useful for Bonanno, not even as a critic of economics, since his thought is philosophical, Hegelian, and therefore “smells like metaphysics.” Allergic to philosophical terminology, he dares to describe Marx’s work as “a program that has its roots in the Protestant mysticism of the Middle Ages” (“After Marx, Autonomy”) which could be considered an opinion if it were not for the fact that Protestantism has nothing to do with mysticism and did not take place in the Middle Ages. Bonanno always has the problem of those who have to discuss everything, whether or not they know what they are talking about, and ridiculous slips appear frequently in his extensive work. He could have easily appreciated the role of classical German philosophy in the formation of revolutionary thought by clinging to Bakunin, an insuperable exponent of Hegel’s influence. His critique of syndicalism repeats something 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). The rest does not differ from what councillist Marxists used to say (he even cites Pannekoek); he just extends it to anarchist unions. However, he does not bother with workers’ councils, assemblies, committees, and other forms of horizontal coordination, since Bonanno is

not interested in the working class “in itself”, but rather how anarchism is articulated in its self-organization. Anarchists are not to inject their ideas into the masses from outside, through propaganda: “[The revolutionary anarchist project] starts from the specific context of actual struggles... Above all this 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 struggle, from the concrete, material level of the class clash, building small autonomous base organisms that are capable of placing themselves at the point of concurrence between the total vision of liberation and the partial strategic vision that revolutionary collaboration renders indispensable” (Bonanno, “Fictitious Movement and Real Movement”). In 1975 Bonanno thought (and he was right) that Italian society was in a pre-revolutionary phase, so the fundamental thing was the autonomous organization of workers, for which “autonomous base nuclei” or “autonomous worker nuclei” were necessary: these were just “small autonomous base organizations dedicated to the radical struggle against the present structures of production” (“A Critique of Syndicalist Methods”). These nuclei would be the place where anarchists met the proletariat. He distrusted larger structures such as workers’ assemblies,

since they restricted the autonomy of groups and could be easily manipulated by bureaucrats and demagogues. He did not say much about the steps that came after that—and then a qualitative jump in social tensions put the question of arms on the table.

In the mid-70s the Italian state had weakened to the extreme. It revealed its frailty by recurring to staging terrorist acts that pointed to fictitious enemies with the complicity of the mass media and the Stalinists. The attempts at industrial restructuring aggravated social revolt, which moved from the factories to the street. In Bonanno's words, "the revolutionary movement, including the anarchist movement, was in a phase of development, and anything seemed possible, including the generalization of armed conflict." The existence of a militarized party like the Red Brigades provoked in anti-authoritarian milieus the fear that it would seize control of struggles. The debate on armed libertarian alternatives gave birth in 1977 to *Azione Rivoluzionaria* (AR), "a combat structure as open as possible to the base." The critique of arms, "the only force that can make a project credible" according to AR, was reaching the level of open confrontation among revolutionaries (no longer in the FAI, which, much more interested in syndicalism than revolution, obviously condemned armed struggle). Some saw it as

a separated violence that did not lead to class conflict but to the spectacle of conflict, contributing to criminalize the “autonomist movement” and to provoke its repression. For AR the movement would not be taken seriously, and seriously feared, without an armed guerilla. It was logical for repression to follow the revolutionary offensive, guerilla or no guerilla, but thanks to the guerilla’s role as lightning rod, throwing itself onto the repressive apparatus, the movement still had its bases, its newspapers, and its radio stations. Bonanno’s first response was the text “Revolutionary Movement and Project,” followed by the book *Armed Joy*, which had a great impact in its time owing less to breaking militant taboos than to being banned soon after publication (in Bologna close to three thousand were distributed or sold). There was a Spanish edition called *Armed Pleasure*. The book has no analysis of the moment, nor does it seriously discuss weapons: it is a book of principles, not strategy. Its novelty is not in its content, recuperated from the *Comontismo* group (1972-1974) and the writings of the ex-Situationist Raoul Vaneigem (“Terrorism and Revolution”—1972, and “From the wildcat strike to generalized self-management”—1974, which were quite popular in Italy) but in that it brings together and, with a superficial touch appropriate for any and all readers, deals with every issue that could concern rebels who do not par-

particularly like to read and for whom revolution is a kind of generalized open bar party. Despite some disdainful words he has for May '68, his language is prositu: revolution is a festival, never work; self-management is the self-management of exploitation; struggle is pleasure; play is a weapon, destruction of the commodity, etc. The word *spectacle* is repeated dozens of times, while references to the State, more appropriate for anarchists, are minimal. On some pages, Bonanno feigned, in Vaneigemese, to “oppose the non-work aesthetic to the work ethic.” Although not long before, he had fought for the “autonomous organization of production,” now “The only way for the exploited to escape the globalizing project of capital is through the refusal of work, production and political economy (...) The revolution cannot be reduced to a simple reorganization of work. ... The revolution is the negation of labor and the affirmation of joy.” Despite having dedicated a book to the idea that the expropriated should reappropriate the totality of the productive process, that is, self-management, now he condemned it as a mystification: “If the struggle is victorious the self-management of production becomes superfluous, because after the revolution the organization of production is superfluous and counter-revolutionary.” Someone looking for an outline of strategy or just practical ideas to face the immediate problems of that revolu-

tion which in 1977 was played for double or nothing was not going to find them in the book, always one mystification ahead, including the parts about armed struggle. Besides congratulating himself for violence against the police, bosses, or the journalists of power, and that bit about “hurry to arm yourself,” he warned against making the machine gun sacred, since armed struggle did not represent “the entirety of the revolutionary dimension.” In any case it was unquestionable, since any criticism of it would help “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 hospital for the comrades who are carrying out such attacks.” And that’s all: a call to have a good time and leave the armed groups be while the Italian proletariat faced the choice of abolishing work or continuing to work. Bonanno, since the pages of *Anarchismo*, had affirmed the generalization of illegal behavior and the pre-revolutionary slant of the moment, but the guerilla organization AR ironized about the purely literary character of the positioning of the “critical critique of Catania” that “will finally clarify what the revolutionary tasks of anarchists are. Given the premises, we should expect this kind of response: anarchists should bring the exploited to revolt. If we interpret that with ill will, this will mean: the old guard, the Leninists, the Stalinists, the workerists, all revolt. Why do

anarchists limit themselves to bringing others to do it? Who will push them? Are they not once again outside of history? A well-meaning interpretation: to push the exploited to revolt in the only possible way, that is, to revolt themselves, not with rivers of ink..." (AR, "The Movement of '77 and the Guerrilla"). The general strike never happened, so that armed groups and unrealistic elements like Bonanno were more and more isolated. Although the ebb of the movement of 1977 left armed struggle as the only way out for many rebels, there were never the ten, one hundred, one thousand armed nuclei that AR announced in its founding statement. The unions imposed order in the factories and the police imposed it in the streets. The State reinforced itself; illegal acts were harshly repressed. There were waves of detentions; armed struggle dissolved like a sugar cube in water. In 1979, most of the members of AR were imprisoned and, from their cells, announced the guerilla was over. Some went over to the Leninist organization *Prima Linea*, which produced doubts about the ideological steadiness of the former organization, so roundly proclaimed in their leaflets and communiqués. At the end of 1977, Bonanno was arrested for *Armed Joy* and, on November 30, 1979, condemned to a year and a half of prison for having written it. Far from cowering or repenting, he made common cause with activist prisoners, such as those of

the Red Brigades or the P38, publically lashing out against Amadeo Bertolo and Paolo Finzi, who, in *A Rivista Anarchica*, had gone all out in attacking his review of a book on Emile Henry. It was the first time he had been publically attacked in an anarchist newspaper; they laid into him for showing off in meetings. Bonanno took advantage of the occasion to deal with the question of class violence minus suspicious moralizing: “A terrorist is not one who confronts power with violence in order to destroy it; one who uses violent and cruel means to secure the continuance of exploitation is. That is why, since only a small minority is interested in that continuance (bosses, fascists, politicians of every stripe, union officers, etc) it is logical to deduce that the ‘true’ terrorists are the latter, insofar as they use violent means to perpetuate exploitation. These people’s violence is carried out in the force of laws, in prisons, in the obligation to work, in the automatic mechanism of exploitation. The rebellion of the exploited is never terrorism.” (“Of the Terrorism of some Idiots and Other Matters,” 1979). Assimilating constraints to extreme forms of oppression, he identifies it all with terrorism: “Let us say that a terrorist must be one who terrorizes another, one who tries to obtain something by imposing their point of view with actions that sow terror. Thus, it is clear that power terrorizes the exploited in a hundred ways. They are

afraid of not working, of poverty, of laws, of the cops, of public opinion; they suffer from a compact psychological terrorism that reduces them to a state of almost complete submission in the struggle against power. That is terrorism” (*ibid*). However, Bonanno does not end up endorsing armed struggle, still debatable at the strategic level, and even less the necessity of an “armed party.” What he rejects is the contrast, which he considers Manichean, between armed struggle and mass struggle, because it would lead to the delegitimation and criminalization of those who practice the former.

He posed the question so as not to answer it: armed struggle is a respectable option, with which one could agree or disagree, but that no guardian of anarchy could cast out of the temple. It was not all good, it was not all bad; but it was always ethically justifiable. This issue would end up as his specialty, but he was not content with that. Around that time his thinking took on a worrisome degree of confusion and lack of style. Bonanno came down with a case of graphomania. With great confidence, he took on any issue, using a sententious tone that aspired to a sense of profundity and abundant allusions that made it seem he knew more than what he let on—typical tricks to impress less demanding readers. Facts were not of great importance and he rarely appealed to them as a basis for his peremptory assertions. If he mentioned the “real

movement,” it was as a simple commonplace of his convoluted rhetoric. He would move from one issue to another between outbursts, topics, gratuitous affirmations, and, once in a while, some truth half drowning in so much phraseology, stringing it all together without the least logical sequence. The end was the beginning: insurrectional action. We can gather examples of his nonsense by the dozen, but it is enough to glance at “The Bathwater and the Baby,” in which he attempted to liquidate his badly digested Situationism, the “movement,” the dialectic, and Marxism, among other things. The fact that Bonanno discounted theoretical activity if it did not lead to immediate and overwhelming action did not save him from becoming one of those (to say it in his own words) “lovers of the pen, who produce analysis like Fiat produces automobiles.”

In May 1980, the police carried out a raid against the anarchists associated with the magazine *Anarchismo*. Bonanno and his comrades were accused of belonging to AR, but the set-up failed in the drill stage. The end of the revolutionary movement came about in the midst of an endless stream of informants and reformed repentants. Toni Negri himself was at the head of the “dissociated”, those who promised never to fight the state in exchange for penitentiary

benefits, and he signed up for the chorus of those who asked for amnesty. Bonanno rightly attacked them in the 1984 booklet entitled *And We Will Still Be Ready To Storm The Heavens Another Time*, which earned him another trial. From the easy defeat of the revolutionaries he drew conclusions that went against those of the surviving anarchist organizations, since they indicated the need for violent action against persons and things that embodied repression, bourgeois justice, technobureaucracy, syndicalism, and capitalism, all of which must “be translated into precise acts, acts of attack, not just in words, but in deeds” (“The Illogical Revolution,” 1984). True anarchists must be in permanent revolt and begin to attack: “We insistently reaffirm that the use of organized violence against exploiters, even if it takes the form of minoritarian and limited action, is an indispensable instrument in the anarchist struggle against exploitation” (*And We Will...*) After years of beating around the bush, finally the step was to be taken. The prison cell discussions and the shameful spectacle of the repentant and dissociated had each contributed something. Bonanno, who we thank for forgetting Spinoza and the “diffuse worker”, pronounces obvious truths that are fortunately not disguised by his pretentious verborrhea: “They will not give us an amnesty. We will have to pay for it.” The price will be the revolutionary spirit, ideas,

dignity, bravery. “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” (*ibid*). In fact, the betrayal of Negri and the collaborators resided in their weird Leninism, which translated everything into terms of separated power. As self-proclaimed representatives of the working class, they were the privileged interlocutors of the State and their salvation was to crudely depict the central question. As a defeated party, they were not going to fight for their freedom, but to negotiate their freedom to take up the struggle again by other means. With their future mortgaged by the agreements with the State, what would that struggle

look like? Bonanno accurately indicated that it was one thing to drop your weapons because you had changed your mind and another to do it because the dominant power demanded it of you: “they don’t want your ‘critique’, they want your *mea culpa*” (*ibid*, JW trans. modified). Before the state, no one is innocent: “We are all responsible for our dream of storming the heavens. 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 80s, with a submissive working class and thousands of people in prison. To search for a balance sheet of the process that led to this disaster in his works is to search in vain. Bonanno only offered us a reaffirmation: “In these times of liquidation and stagnation, we reaffirm that our struggle is a struggle for total liberation, here and now.” Using an inverted Manicheanism, he opposed class struggle to insurrectionary revolt, by not considering the latter

as a moment of the development of the former, but as an instrument: “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 get there, he needed to be aware of the necessity of generalizing violence and that 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*). To the degree that such logorrhea made sense, it sounded bad: the masses were incapable of reaching revolutionary goals without the concurrence of an elite (be it called “specific movement”); if not, its “intermediate” struggles would never reach the necessary insurrectional level. Bonannist anarchism was beginning to concretize as a vulgar adventurist and vanguardist ideology, fairly close in its theoretical foundations to the militarist extremism of the “armed party.” In the following years Bonanno elaborated the basic concepts of the insurrectionalist ideology, setting out from the separation between class struggle and insurrectional struggle, a separation that only a select “specific” minority could help

to overcome. His work began to be known outside of Italy and he himself became an infamous figure of international anarchism. His great theoretical discovery—that any sort of action, minoritarian though it may be, was possible and desirable at any time—would invariably mark his path.

In the beginning was the act. The separation of theory and practice reduced one to a simple accompaniment and the other to mere technique. For Bonanno, the “not waiting” of the “specific” anarchist organizations and “passing into action” required a different type of organization, impermanent and defined as “informal”, and he thought he had found it in his affinity groups. Said groups were to elaborate a “project,” product of their analyses and discussions, which would orient and stimulate action. Using the technical language of management and marketing, in one of the articles in *Anarchismo* he described the project as “the site of the conversion of theory into practice”, specifying the four conditions sine qua non of that elaboration that the revolutionary was to bring together, to wit: courage, perseverance, creativity, and “materiality” (meaning something like common sense). The Milan gathering in October of 1985 around the motto “Anarchism and the Insurrectional Project” allowed Bonanno to expound his vision of the transfor-

mations of capitalism in broad strokes. The ease with which he employed trivial ideas made fashionable by American sociology (for example, describing society as “post-industrial”) and the professorial tone he took on are surprising. In his intervention we can read this bit of nonsense: “From the productive point of view capital’s capacity is no longer based on the resources of financial capital, on investment in other words, but is essentially based on intellectual capital” (“From Riot to Insurrection”). Believe it or not, Bonanno was repeating the words of Professor Negri. “Capital no longer needs to rely on the traditional worker as an element in carrying out production” so “[...] workers have been displaced from their central position. First, timidly, in the sense of a move out of the factory into the whole social terrain [Negri again]. Then, more decisively, in the sense of a progressive substitution of the secondary manufacturing sector by the tertiary services sector.” One wonders if he knew what he was saying, since tertiary services have nothing to do with production, but Bonannist prose has always been a tortured prose, above all when it theorizes. According to him, the working class was progressively moving to the margin of production, losing its protagonism; also, the revolution could just as well happen as not; since in post-industrial society the relation of cause and effect between struggles and their outcomes disap-

peared. Bonanno had noticed the uprisings of marginal districts in English cities and gratuitously pontificated about the anarchists' task: "to transform irrational situations of riot into an insurrectional and revolutionary reality" (*ibid*). The matter was shelved indefinitely, but I have already said that theory is not his forte and, having to regularly fill up a couple of publications, he unscrupulously proceeded with the materials he was pirating. For example, in 1987 he copied the layout and typography of the magazine *Encyclopédie des Nuisances* for the new series of *Anarchismo*, which would be a harmless anecdote were it not for the fact that three articles of the *EdN* were copied in two successive issues of Bonanno's organ. Unexplained cuts, abusive interpolations, arbitrary revisions and numerous unintentional errors forced the *EdN* to propagate a communiqué that concluded "Those who, showing off a critique that is not their own, begin by concealing its origin as much as possible, as well as hiding the struggles from which it emerges and the relations they imply, show, in this way, that they are not capable of using this critique and discovering the secrets of their time, or of understanding the diverse specialized operations of spectacular democracy. Where fiction rules the large stage, small falsifications are of no importance. We nevertheless take advantage of the occasion to declare our modest conviction that the latter explain

the triumph of the former, and that the collapse of the former comes through the end of the latter.” Such trifles did not concern Bonanno. His problem was, on one hand, “attack”, and, on the other, the police’s attempts to implicate him in various attentats.

He was the first agitator since Blanqui to declare the possibility of an offensive against Power during a complete retreat of the working class. It was evidently an attempt to escape historical conditions through the overwhelming action of minorities. The main role was, according to Bonanno, to be given to informal groups, the only ones capable of acting effectively. The masses were not interested in revolutionary revelry. He condemned mass demonstrations as peaceful and useless; in their place, in addition to demonstrations “organized in the insurrectional way” he called for “the need for small destructive acts, for direct attack against the structures of capital.” The responsibility for those attacks should be fully taken on by the groups and not depend on favorable or unfavorable consequences, or the level of general consciousness. The decision to directly attack Capital and the State was the business of revolutionaries, repositories of the insurrectional essence of conflict. “We either attack or retreat. We either accept the class logic of the clash as an irreducible

counter-position or move backwards towards negotiation and verbal and moral deception” (“Propulsive Utopia”). If they wanted to live their lives, liberate their instincts, negate bourgeois ideals, satisfy their authentic needs or whatever other trivialities from the liberated vocabulary of the dissatisfied rebels, words were not enough. Anarchists had to overcome the political and moral barriers that impeded them from acting. Bonanno described such efforts as “the great work of liberating the new ethical man” (“The Moral Fracture,” in his magazine *Provocazione*, March 1988). He disdained assembly-style methods because they slowed down or stopped the more decisive actions; he also disdained initiatives that sought to bring together the maximum number of adherents: “the mania for quantity”. For that reason he paid no attention to the protest movements at the base, such as the COBAS [*Confederazione dei Comitati di Base*], constituted in November 1987. The Bonannist model was that of the “self-managed leagues” formed at the beginning of the eighties by the people of Comiso (Sicily) to oppose an American missile base. They were informal “nuclei” advised by anarchists with only one objective: the destruction of the military base. With no program, autonomous (ie independent of parties, unions, or any other entity), they remained in “permanent conflict” with domination and “attack-

ing” without engaging in dialogue, negotiations, or agreements. Probably so as to distinguish them from non-immediately destructive struggles, he called these sorts of conflicts “intermediate struggles”, to contrast them with others with wider objectives, motivated by the “insurrectional task”, like the “struggle against technology” that resulted in the dynamiting of more than one hundred high voltage towers between 1986 and 1988. The translation of a German pamphlet that detailed how to blow up one of these towers earned Bonanno a new stay in prison. In the campaign of the pylons, in which rebels of various countries participated, the mania for quantity returned through the back door: the syndicalists counted membership cards, and the activists, bombings. The quantitative spirit prevailed equally in all. For the efficacy of an attack does not depend on the number of explosions, nor on the degree of destruction brought about. There are not “intermediate” struggles and real struggles; there are practical struggles and useless struggles—struggles that awaken the consciousness of oppression and struggles that put it to sleep. The police was unable to implicate Bonanno in any violent act, but it did treacherously implicate him in a jewelry store robbery. He was arrested on February 2, 1989, and freed without charges two years later. Once free, he seized the opportunity to travel to Spain and put the

final touches on insurrectionalism, an ideology that had its influence in the anarchist milieus of various countries where anarchism was stagnant, dormant, and controlled by factions.

In 1992, Bonanno and other comrades decided to take a qualitative leap in “attack”, seizing an “organizational occasion”. To that end, they brought together the group that instigated an Anti-Authoritarian Insurrectionalist International. The word “Insurrectionalist” appeared for the first time. In January 1993, he traveled to Greece and presented two lectures to university students in Athens and Thessalonica in which he explained “why we are insurrectionalist anarchists”. Here is the insurrectionalist ideology summed up in six bullet 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, de-

structive attack against the structures, individuals and organizations of Capital and the State.

- ▶ Because we constructively criticize 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

(“The Insurrectional Project”)

The idea of an organization, the elements of which had been being formulated for the last twenty-five years, completed the ideology. Bonanno just stuck it into a label-sticker with which many would be unhappy. “The revolutionary anarchist insurrectionalist organization” consists of affinity groups formed in times of struggle with the goal “of carrying out specific coordinated actions against the enemy” and “aimed at creating the best conditions for mass insurrection”. The insurrectionary character is granted

by “permanent conflictuality,” that is, knowing one is at war with the oppression of capitalism and the State. Such groups will rely on “base nuclei”, the old Bonannist idea, whose function “to take the place of the old trade union resistance organizations—including those who insist on the anarcho-syndicalist ideology—in the ambit of intermediate struggles” in a terrain consisting of “what is left of factories, neighborhoods, schools, social ghettos, and all those situations that materialize class exclusion.” For Bonanno, it was the destructive aspect, not the degree of consciousness provoked in the masses that established the appropriateness of the action. So it goes without saying that the preferred form is sabotage, “the classic weapon of all the excluded” (“Another Turn of the Capitalist Screw”), valid for any occasion and good for all ages. Sabotage is like desire—it has neither schedule nor calendar date.

Analyses of social reality continue to be Bonanno’s unfinished business. He states there is no “factory mentality” and asserts the “deskilling” of the individual and the “pulverization” of the working class, so he thinks it unfounded to refer to “ridiculous dichotomies such as that between bourgeoisie and proletariat”, only to move from there to similar dichotomies taken from pop sociology: “specific social

reality... always presents a constant: the class division between dominators and dominated, between included and excluded.” The dichotomies do not stop there, since he alludes to “the confrontation between rich countries and poor countries” that takes on, or tends to take on, the form of national liberation struggles or religious wars. This confrontation, occasioned by capitalism’s incapacity to “resolve the economic problems of poor countries”, leads him to find positive aspects in nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism, whose brief appearances around the Mediterranean lead him to conclude that this will be the “theater of the coming social confrontations”. Reading newspapers has convinced him that he is an expert in geopolitics, since he claims, without bothering to prove it, that in the Mediterranean countries “conflicts will develop that will be able to heighten the tensions already underway”; he does not clarify if they will be conflicts between classes or states (probably both) but in any case they will have to be confronted with the most adequate practice: the insurrectional one (“Proposal for a Debate” 1993). Actually, Bonanno is referring to the Palestinian conflict, in which he has placed great hopes. As always, armed struggle, having attained the heights to acquire a global vision, remains in the clouds of Third-Worldism.

I say that revolutions, in societies of class antagonism, are made by the oppressed masses, not by formal or informal minorities. Organization will be the product of social struggles, not the artificial fruit of activist voluntarism or propaganda. If the times are not ripe, it is because there are no movements of conscious masses. Because we can't do better, we do what we can, but the lack of massive struggles will never be compensated for by the activism of a few groups. A strategic defense would be to organize the theater of social war with the objective of fighting the class enemy. That would mean to free up spaces for the development of consciousness in the masses, that is to say, for the emergence of autonomous struggles. In the opposite context, activism not only substitutes for such struggles, it sets itself up as the radical spectacle of such struggles. As much as it tries to contribute to the resurgence of revolutionary protest, it prepares the terrain for its perversion. This incredible confusion of insurrectionalist theses was unacceptable, but the inconsistency and superficiality of the analyses did not matter to Bonanno, possessed by a desire for action that he was able to transmit to anarchists disappointed by the inactivity of traditional organizations. They became followers of his ideas, beyond all logic, especially because logic was not their most attractive characteristic. Insurrectionalism permeated certain youth milieus not because of its lucidity

or theoretical superiority. Nor did it do so through the efficacy of its actions, often seasoned with the vinegar of prison and personal tragedy. Even less so because the Mediterranean prophecy came true. The reasons for its relative success were of a psychological nature: those who wanted action got action. Action had something of an emotional release to it. Bonanno had realized that “anarchism is a tension, not a realization” (*The Anarchist Tension*, talk in Cuneo, January 1995), and he insisted on this fact. Bonanno described the anarchist coming to 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 simply a way of seeing things. It produced an intimate liberation, the elevation to a state of anarcho-grace that helped to free oneself from the bonds of one’s surroundings: “insurrectionalism is a personal thing; each one should accomplish their own insurrection, modify their own ideas, transform the reality that surrounds him, beginning with the family, with school, which are structures that keep us imprisoned...” (Interview with Bonanno on Radio Onda Rossa, 20 November 1997, trans. modified). Anarchists, if they wanted to be real anarchists, had to question themselves daily in terms of what they did and what they thought, since doing and thinking could not go separately. Either “metaphysics” or anarchism—that is,

action. Action therefore took on an existential dimension. An anarchist without action was like a garden without flowers, or like an officer without a uniform. Why stop, if one was in “permanent conflictuality”? Action became a moral criterion: one was a good anarchist or a bad anarchist depending on whether one did or did not act. Bonannism, that peculiar revolutionary version of American *do it yourself*, offered all the charms of sectarian militancy with none of its organic servitudes. The lack of true social movements was not so much a handicap as a condition of insurrectionalism: the illegal character of agitation suggested, for obvious reasons a certain distance from prosaic work with masses. An extreme individualism called “autonomy” protected the professional anarchist from all critique (a few passages from Stirner perhaps tended to reinforce it). The *insurrectos* could believe themselves to be in the limelight whatever the relevance or pointlessness of their actions; because they were indifferent to the masses, they had no one to answer to. They were their only judges. Due to a historical irony, old Bonanno has survived his contradictions and defects, thanks to acne.

The Insurrectionalist International met in Athens in fall 1996, a little before or a little after Bonanno was imprisoned for belonging to an armed group. Repressive forces had also begun to act, with deten-

tions and media-judicial montages beginning in 1994. *Anarchismo* had stopped coming out, but in *Cane nero*, published in Florence, the different informal factions of the International momentarily converged. The insurrectionalists had overestimated the revolutionary possibilities of the Mediterranean countries and underestimated the repressive abilities of an over-equipped State. The most basic kind of strategy would have posed this question first of all: could insurrectionalist practice survive the repression that was about to break out? Of course not. The Marini trial was the Italian State's response to the insurrectionalist pinprick. There were similar responses in Greece and Spain (Bonanno did not pull a Fanelli: insurrectionalism had its debut here with the Córdoba robbery fiasco in 1996). Bonanno left prison in October 1997. The divergences between the different groups, exacerbated by repression, blew up as could have been predicted. The International met a second time in 2000 somewhere in Italy and concluded its existence. Four years later the Marini trial ended with harsh sentences for most of the defendants. Nevertheless, in one way or another the insurrectionalists keep at it and have not

forgotten their prisoners. “Offer flowers to the rebels who failed,” Vanzetti said. My critiques do not prevent me from acknowledging his courage, and our disagreement is not an obstacle for me in demanding his freedom.

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