

# **Alfredo Bonanno and the Anarchist Tension**

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“Anarchists inhabit an uncomfortable planet in any case because when the struggle is going well they are forgotten about and when the struggle goes badly they are accused of being responsible, of having approached it the wrong way, of having taken it to the wrong conclusions (*The Anarchist Tension*, 30).”

*The Anarchist Tension* consists of a talk given by the Italian insurrectionist Alfredo Bonanno at some or other unnamed conference and begins with the author-lecturer asking the question, “What is anarchism?” Bonanno suggests that this is a question which always bids asking, first because anarchists are often unable to give much of an answer ourselves, and, more importantly, because “anarchism” is an evolving notion.

“Because it is not a definition that can be made once and for all, put in a safe and considered a patrimony to be tapped little by little. Being an anarchist does not mean one has reached a certainty, or said once and for all, “There, from now on I hold the truth and as such, at least from the point of view of the idea, I am a privileged person”. Anyone who thinks like this is an anarchist in word alone (3–4).”

Much of the pamphlet is devoted to Bonanno’s argument for the importance of *living* anarchy—of making ideas, feelings, aesthetics, desires and actions one in life.

“When we wake up in the morning and put our feet on the ground we must have a good reason for getting up, if we don’t it makes no difference whether we are anarchists or not. We might as well stay in bed and sleep (4).”

Life, for anarchists, holds a qualitatively different character than for democrats. In response to democratic criticisms of anarchism, Bonanno responds that anarchism is not a quantification, a success or failure, but an ongoing tension.

“This is the critique we need to throw back at the supporters of democracy. If we anarchists are utopians, we are so as a tension towards quality; if democrats are utopians, they are so as a reduction towards quantity. And against reduction, against the atrophy lived in a dimension of the minimum possible damage for them and the maximum damage for the great number of people who are exploited, to this miserable reality we oppose our utopia which is at least a utopia of quality, a tension towards another future, one that will be radically different to what we are living now (8).”

What is needed is action to break the lies of the democratic dystopians.

“Because any one of us can realise we have been swindled, because we have finally realised what is being done to our detriment. And in rising up against it all we can change not only the reality of things within the limits that it is possible to know them, but also one’s life, make it worthy of being lived (9).”

Anarchism is always more than the sum of events and actions, of theories, people and movements. It’s this precisely, this “something other” which, according to Bonanno, ensures that anarchy lives on.

“So we continually need to maintain a relationship between this tension towards something absolutely other, the unthinkable, the unsayable, a dimension we must realise without very well knowing how to, and the daily experience of the things we can and do, do. A precise relationship of change, of transformation (10).”

Bonanno cautions that anarchists not make any idea into a religious concept, something which comforts us in our present misery with promises of delivery and salvation in some indeterminate future. Nice ideas, uncritically held, do not solve problems but mystify and cloud them over.

“Now freedom is an idea we must hold in our hearts, but at the same time we need to understand that if we desire it we must be ready to face all the risks that destruction involves, all the risks of destroying the constituted order we are living under. Freedom is not a concept to cradle ourselves in, in the hope that improvements will develop independently of our real capacity to intervene (14).”

Anarchists, thus need to break through “massified ideas” (15), the reduction of thought to “flattened,” “uniform” and “acceptable” opinions. “We are not for more freedom. More freedom is given to the slave when his chains are lengthened. We are for the abolition of the chain, so we are for freedom, not more freedom” (13).

In one of the more insightful passages, Bonanno relates transformations within the workplace, i.e flexible production, to the socialization of a “new human,” the “flexible person with modest ideas, rather opaque in their desires, with considerably reduced cultural levels, impoverished language, standardised reading, a limited capacity to think and a great capacity to make yes or no decisions” (20). Lean production becomes the model for human expectation and experience. This “lean identity” extends the workplace throughout society rendering capital fully social.

“What will they do with such a person? They will use them to bring about all the modifications that are necessary for restructuring capital. They will be useful for a better management of the conditions and relations of the capitalism of tomorrow...This new person is quite the opposite of what we are capable of imagining or desire; the opposite of quality, creativity, the opposite of real desire, the joy of life, the opposite of all this (20).”

Despite this concern, Bonanno does not view the working class as the center of social structure or social analysis. He urges anarchists to think beyond both Marx and anarcho-syndicalists since, in his view, “the working class has practically disintegrated” (23)—a claim that does not appear valid in the face of more people doing more lousy work for more time. A better analysis might be found in George Caffentzis’ writings on the return of slavery.

Unfortunately, Bonanno offers only a limited caricature of anarcho-syndicalism. Syndicalists, contrary to Bonanno’s depiction, have not argued for the simple control by workers of existing productive structures. Syndicalists have argued for a new world, but recognize that it is unlikely to occur unless workers break the chains of capitalist social relations (including work relations).

For all this Bonanno is no anti-organizationalist. He argues that anarchists need agile organizations, since “power realises itself in time and space” (29), and sees the small affinity group as the most effective form. Not just a group of folks getting together for a party or chat, as in

autonomous zones, the affinity group is a place of conscious preparation for action. Different affinity groups will bring their ideas to other groups through an informal federation. Curiously, much of Bonanno's discussion on this matter does not sound overly dissimilar to some notions of anarcho-syndicalism.

This is a work that raises as many questions as it answers, which is its strength. While some of Bonanno's suggestions are insufficiently addressed here, leaving many of his arguments unconvincing, it remains a compelling piece animated by an overarching commitment to action.

## **Bibliography**

Bonanno, Alfredo M. 1998. *The Anarchist Tension*. London: Elephant Editions

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