
INTERVIEW WITH ALESSANDRO BONANNO

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DAVID HEATH COOPER: How would you situate yourself within the broader sociological discipline?

ALESSANDRO BONANNO: Knowledge is not absolute, it is historically situated. Marx and Gramsci, among others, demonstrate how knowledge not only is the product of our personal biographies, but also, of the times in which we live. For me, I would like to use my sociology to democratize society. To make it more democratic than it is. For this reason, what I study is the capitalist system. This system is both the source of democracy, but also the source of problems with democracy. I approach this from a broader theoretical point of view that is rooted in an empirical dimension, in the empirical indicators of these abstract ideas. Specifically, I use food as my empirical indicator, as my substantive field of research. I could have used other economic sectors. But since I was a young graduate student, my interests has been in helping people that are struggling both those on the side of production, in this case, the small farmers and farm workers and, on the other, people who do not have access to food around the world. This is the idea that has motivated my research. I followed Weber's argument that we use our values to

identify what we like to study. In my case, that was the issue of democracy.

Democracy is strongly associated with the notions of equality. Equality, and in particular socio-economic equality, has declined in the last thirty years as the distance between the haves and the have-nots has increased tremendously. Dwelling on this situation, my idea is to study the capitalist system and the way in which it is organized. I use the classical analyses of the capitalist systems, starting from Marx but also Weber, and others, including Karl Polanyi, and others like Antonio Gramsci. These are all strong influences on my research. Early on in my career, I studied the Fordist system and its crisis. This was the system that operated in the post-war era and, in fact, started before World War II, but came to full fruition in the years after the war. This system entered its final crisis in the 70s, and was replaced by the neoliberal regime, that is the subject of my book, *The Legitimation Crisis of Neoliberalism*. From there, I started studying the neoliberal system including its ideology and then its crisis.

COOPER: I think it's interesting to recognize that the birth of capitalism also gave rise to a kind of democracy and that within neoliberalism, too, there is a similar kind of argumentation, that it represents a vision for a new kind of democracy, one that is rooted in the market place. It is *through* unregulated, laissez-faire markets, proponents would argue, that *real* democracy is found. Do you see these shifts in our visions of what democracy is as a result of the shifting economic orders, say from Fordism to neoliberalism? Because it seems we are also on the cusp of some other economic or social shift. I would not want to say that we are already in a post-neoliberal order, but certainly the crisis is there.

BONANNO: There is a lot to unpack there but let us try to simplify the answer and get to the point. Democracy is socially constructed, so it changes with time. In fact, what was democracy at one time is not democracy at another time, and this is not in terms of theory. It is in terms of what the *mood* of society is and what is recognized as such. Accordingly, one approach to answering that question is to look at how the bourgeois revolution established the notion of democracy, in opposition to the notion of a class or a stratified

society. Previously, the aristocracy was seen as a separate and superior class from the commoners and the peasantry in the sense that the aristocrats were a different kind of human beings, they were closer to God and, because of this, they were the legitimate rulers.

The Enlightenment and the political revolutions of modernity brought down that particular system and that particular discourse and created the contemporary notion of equality. Accordingly, the various national constitutions, including the American constitution, and all the various political declarations that were written following the Enlightenment and early modernity, as well as the intellectual production that has occurred during since then, supported those political revolutions and provided the motivation for them. Out of this comes the notion of formal equality.

Capitalism accelerated its growing throughout the 18th century and the creation of the *laissez-faire* ideology described a system that implies the separation between the economy and the polity. According to Adam Smith, however, this separation is not absolute. He contended that the political sphere defines the boundaries of the functioning of the economy as well as the goals of society. As stressed in his “theory of moral sentiments,” that the ideas of solidarity and interdependence are highly important and they need to be preserved in the execution of economic actions. In essence, for Smith moral sentiments, codified in the political realm, define the functioning of the economy. Let me put it that way, for Smith, the political sphere defines the framework within which the economy functions.

Adam Smith was not necessarily opposed to state intervention in the economy. He felt that the state should create the framework within which the market operates. Therefore, an absolute free market – as argued by contemporary neoliberals – is not a desirable condition. Once the state set the parameters within which the economy should operate, Smith maintained, the free market with do the rest. He argued about the centrality of the theory of exchange and the notion of marginal utility. Marginal utility refers to the idea that I am willing to exchange one item of which I have extra for one item that I do not have, but you have in surplus. The result is a gain for you and a gain for me. When I give you something that you do not have, and you give me something that you have in excess, then both

of us gain. Accordingly, the idea behind market exchange is one of a win-win situation in which all gain.

The economy is theorized to work that way, but the idea is that it is framed within the political dimension. This view of the functioning of the economy not only was maintained for the 18th century, but also for the greatest part of the 19th century. But then, starting from the middle of the 19th century, within the liberal camp,¹ there is growing recognition that formal equality is simply not sufficient to allow the economy to grow. The call was for substantive equality. John Stuart Mill, for instance, wrote *On Liberty* in 1859, a key work in the liberal camp. There he recognized the notion of inequality and, in particular, the notion of gender inequality. Since then, a tremendous amount of works within the liberal camp have recognized that it is not formal equality that counts but the substantive equality. Accordingly, we have a new wave of liberal thinking that stressed that in order for people to have effective and just market exchange both parties need to be placed in the conditions to really be equal partners a place where differences in power can be controlled. And this is the Marxian critique.

Marx's ideas represent a socialist, parallel vision of liberty that began to circulate around that time. His major contribution was to offer a critique of the market. This critique of the market is centered on the notion of differential power and the notion of exploitation. And the issue of the labor market is interesting because there is a critique of the supposed equality of exchange which correctly, in my view, notes that there is a difference between the bourgeoisie and the working class and how they enter the labor market and how they enter the process of exchange. All of this intellectual effort generated a new set of sentiments within the liberal camp whereby the idea was that democracy ought to be substantive. At the around the turn of the last century, we had a particularly important switch in the definition of democracy. It went from a democracy that remains defined by the polity but it's largely created by the function of the economy to a democracy that remains anchored to the functioning of the economy but involves corrective measures that are directed by the state.

¹ By liberal, I am talking in economic terms, as in laissez-faire economics.

COOPER: The roots of this change are located in the mid-19th century. However, it came to full fruition in the late 19th century. In terms of political measures and legislation, we have to wait a couple decades more, and in fact we have to wait until the 1930s and the Great Depression in the United States and the New Deal and other similar activities that were carried out at that time. After the war, this type of substantive democracy became the established system that will be eventually called Fordism. Here, we have is a different form of democracy whereby the state intervenes to correct the malfunctioning of the market. This type of economy is based on and theorized by, Keynesian economics. Keynesian economics rejects this idea of self-generated equilibrium in the market whereby it is the role of state intervention to stimulate the market to achieve economic growth. Investment and saving, supply and demand cannot reach equilibrium automatically. It is reached through state intervention. The implementation of Keynesian economics created what we call a planned capitalism which was practiced in Europe that in the U.S. And that was the dominant position vis-à-vis economic policy for many years. Democracy then was a democracy in which a different form of substantive equality was contemplated and practiced. What happened after that in the last three decades of neoliberal system? First, the Fordist system entered its final crisis and, second, Fordism was replaced by Neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is different from laissez-faire because it rejects this idea that equal exchange is the fundamental component of the market economy. Under Neoliberalism the central dimension of the economy is competition. This is significantly different from the type of free market proposed by Adam Smith. What is the, then, the difference between a free market based on equal exchange and one based on competition?

BONANNO: Equal exchange, as I explained earlier, is theorized as a win-win situation as both parties gain from the exchange. In the case of competition, however, there is only one winner. When two actors compete, one wins and the other loses. This means that, often, some groups are left with diminished availability and access to socio-economic rewards. To be sure, this was the concern of early state planners of the Fordist era. Their preoccupation was not to create unwanted inequality just because of the functioning of the

capitalist system. Under Fordism, correctives to the unwanted consequences of the expansion of capitalism were set in place. Neoliberals changed that situation. Their argument rested on the point that free competition is by the best way in which efficiently, productivity and, ultimately, economic growth are achieved. Free market competition, neoliberals contend, provides the best allocation of resources. This is not the job of the State. It is what the market does best. Those who prosper through competition are defined as resilient. Deserving individuals find the resources to be resilient and survive competition. State should not interfere in this process of natural selection as its intervention would alter the process of best allocation of resources. Socio economic distortions, neoliberals continue, are the direct result of State intervention. Hayek argued that State planning is a problem because no matter what kind of brains you have in the planning room, in the planning committee, in the planning process, these individuals are humans, and they have human limitations. They cannot foresee what the future is going to be. They are bound to make mistakes. The market, conversely, does not. The market, in other words, is an infallible model because it automatically includes all the important variables and excludes the irrelevant one allowing the perfect allocation of resources. Planners will never be able to do that. This explanation rejects not only the idea of planning, but also the original formulation of Adam Smith. This is the case because it stresses the economization of politics whereby the economy transcends the social and political requirements. Contradicting Smith, the position indicated that what is good for the economy becomes automatically good for the rest of society.

An economic system based on competition means that many people are left behind and inequality grows. A number of specifications should be briefly mentioned. We have differences in the ways in which countries operate in the advanced world. The problems many European countries are experiencing today is largely linked to the fact that they have not abandoned the traditional idea that people should be helped. Yet, it becomes difficult to help people when you have an ideology that calls for a reduction of state intervention, a reduction of funds to help disenfranchised groups, and enhanced competition. But the Europeans are still trying to do it. It is easier for a country, like the US, to have bad jobs, part-time

jobs, jobs that don't have very many benefits, etc. than it is to try to create jobs that still carry benefits like health insurance and funded retirement plans. European countries, for instance, still have nationalized health systems that benefit people and particularly the members of the lower classes. Such a system is expensive and it is viewed as disadvantageous by the upper class in the US as they are not asked to contribute to it through higher taxes. It is easier to say that "I'll give you a part-time job that has no benefits, just pay you minimum wage and then whenever I decide to fire you, I'll fire you" than to have a job that pays all the benefits, where you have workers' rights whereby order to fire you there is a specific process that is costly and complex and above fair for all parts. This grants workers a type of protection that is not practiced in the US. The answer to your question again is, yes, democracy is defined according to the historical period that we consider. Democracy is socially constructed like all the other concepts and practices that we have in society and the type of democracy that we have today is less than type of democracy that we had when I was a graduate student in the 1970s.

COOPER: I find it interesting that in both the Fordist model, and I would argue to some extent in the neoliberal moment, we have movements that create spaces for democratization. The proponents of these ideologies, whether it is Fordism or neoliberalism, highlight these tendencies. But clearly there are anti-democratic tendencies there as well. Even with your book *Geographical Indication and Agri-Food: Development and Democratization*, for instance, it seems like you have a market solution that, on the one hand, is designed to try to empower local food producers in certain ways, or so its proponents would argue. But then, on the other hand, critics would argue that all that geographic indicators really do is help to rationalize these localized spaces so that they are more readily exploited by the global marketplace. Would you mind explaining a bit about geographical indicators and then weigh in on the democratic and anti-democratic potential of these so-called market solutions?

BONANNO: This book is about social democracy. Specifically, it is about attempts by the state to intervene, alter, or modify the rules

of the free market. The key idea of the book is that the food market is a global market. Yet, when you go to the supermarket or the restaurant the food that we buy is not location specific. It may be labeled as Mexican food, Chinese food, Italian food and the like. But we are not sure about the actual origins. It is food from “anywhere.” In effect, the expansion of food as a market is based on the fact that, today, a lot more of foods and food traditions are available to customers. Accordingly, we are exposed to cuisines from virtually all over the world. Which was not the case only a few decades ago.

This means that there are global, largely corporate, actors that control the food system and through this control profit from it. This allows weaker segments of the production sphere to become vulnerable to the actions of these global actors. Their ability to sell their products at a fair price is significantly diminished. We all know that large retailers, like Wal-Mart for instance, use the strategy of volume purchase to force farmers to produce specific quantities and sell them at a price imposed. The freedom that farmers once had to decide how much to produce and where to sell are erased. Additionally, the fact that financial institutions often control the economy status of farms, make the notion of “independent farmer” largely untenable.

There is a wealth of research on the way in which large supermarket chains do provisions of fresh fruit and vegetables around the world to ensure that sophisticated consumers could purchase these products all year round. Just to give an example, I studied grapes and the grape production in Latin America, particularly in Brazil. This is a subject of a different book I published a few years ago. The idea is this, that there are some regions in the world that are known for table grape production. One of this is California another is Southern Europe. These two areas have specific production seasons (the Fall of the Northern hemisphere). Accordingly, there are periods of the year when this crop is not produced in these regions. In the past, this was accepted and table grape consumption was confined to the Fall. It was a seasonal crop. Now, in the global economy, retailers wish to offer table grapes all year around. They source globally grapes to provide a constant supply of products. In the specialized literature, this is called “global sourcing.” Supermarkets source areas around the globe that can produce grapes in periods other than the Fall. For instance, over the

last many decades, we in North America, enjoy Chilean grapes. They come in as counter-seasonal to offset the fact that California and Europe cannot produce grapes. Accordingly, if we go to any of the large supermarkets in Kansas or the Midwest, we find grapes from different parts of the world at different times of the year. Global sourcing is a key condition for a constant supply of fresh fruit for affluent consumers.

To achieve the above, these global providers go to places like Northern Brazil, which is a tropical semi-arid area with very little precipitation. But through modernization processes carried out in the 50s and 60s, it became an irrigated very fertile region. Here the weather and the production conditions are as such grapes can be grown all year round. But that's not what happens. The reality is that supermarket chains buy grapes produced only in two time period windows: In May and December. These are the times when other established grape producing regions cannot produce. This means that despite the desire and ability of local producers to produce all year around, global retailers force them to produce only for specific and quite limited times. In addition, they impose specific requirements of production that transform independent producers into de-facto wage labor that does not have any actual control of the production process. The effort to create geographical indicators is an attempt to counter this proletarianization of independent farmers.

COOPER: So is geographical indication meant to curtail this tendency in neoliberalized markets?

BONANNO: Right. We have a generalized corporate control of the food system. Then there is a response from producers and from communities. There is support from members of the intellectual community, what Gramsci would call organic intellectuals. They devise strategies to fight corporate domination. One of these is geographical indication. In short, it is like the creation of monopolies, or mini monopolies whereby a particular type of product can only be produced in a single geographical region and therefore it's protected from competition from other regions. For instance, we all use Parmesan on our spaghetti, right, but the idea of geographical indication is that Parmesan is produced only in a particular region of Italy and cannot be produced elsewhere. The

same way, for instance, Champagne can only be produced in the Champagne region of France. Products from other regions should be labeled as imitations. The idea of geographical indication is exactly this. If you want to use the name, if you want to use the label, if you want to commercialize this particular product with that name, you need to produce it in this specific region with these specific procedures and ingredients. And there are different ways in which it can be done that are quite complex. There is one that is much more radical that identifies the product with what is known using the French word *terroir*. *Terroir* means the “social and cultural dimensions of a territory.” A particular food comes out of the fact that there is not only a type of land, a type of climate, a type of precipitation and all the other natural variables, but also, because there is a tradition and there is a way of producing it. For example, cheese makers or wine makers have a particular way of producing their food and that is embedded in the cultural tradition of that region. It follows that somebody who is not trained within that tradition can still make cheese and can still make wine and even though they use the same ingredients, they will not make the same product.

This product is the original and it is opposed to the many copies that are generated elsewhere. This approach, based on *terroir*, protects the cultural dimension of a specific food item. This approach is popular in Europe and other parts of the world but not in the US. The US approach is based on the concept of “trademark” whereby producers have the right to patent their products, but, with time, these products will become generic and therefore can be produced openly. In fact, many of the former colonies such as North America, Australia, Latin America, etc., have embraced the trademark approach -- referred to in literature as “Friends of the United States” as opposed to the “Old World Europeans.” This is the way in which the Europeans and Asian countries, like Japan, are fighting against global production and the displacing of family farmers. Some contend that this is a very laudable approach that takes into consideration substantive democracy and fair price. These people want a fair price, so they go back to the idea of equality in the market and equal exchange. The critique that I propose in the book is that no matter what we try, unless there is a broader political system that can guarantee protection from the functioning of the free

market, these measures will be circumvented and stronger competitors (that is global corporations) will prevail. Additionally, I contend that a generalized protectionist system ultimately is counterproductive as it would limit the growth of exchange.

In effect, when there is a generalized protectionist system, a great many niche markets are created and the demand for these products is significantly reduced just because of the entry barriers. If the idea behind geographical indication is to expand the market for these products, its full implementation generates the opposite results. In terms of the project of enhancing democracy, my critique rests on the objection that any sectorial and partial change will ultimately lead to minimal or counterproductive results. To be sure, I am not arguing that geographical indication is negative, per se. I simply contend that it carries with it significant limits. Farmers markets are very good. They allow local producers to still sell their products, but how far they can go? That is the question. Can farmers markets allow to eradicate hunger? Can they address the notion of poverty? They probably will satisfy the romantic appetite for democracy of some affluent consumers, but they will not solve the problem of low- and middle-class people. The problem remains and something else needs to be done. In addition, there is competition from corporations claiming that they can address these problems. We see a lot of large corporations both from the food and non-food industries claiming spaces that once were the exclusive domain of opposition groups. Going back to the definition of democracy, the bourgeois democracy entailed a connection between the ruled and the rulers through the notion of opposition. That is, the dominant power ought to be opposed by subordinate groups. Once dominant corporations present themselves as the representatives of subordinate groups' interests, the notion of opposition vanishes and we may have the beginning of a totalitarian system.

COOPER: That is interesting, it sounds akin to how you could describe the organic food movement, in the United States at least. At first the organic food movement was this kind of grassroots reaction to the industrial food system that was supposed to push back against that system, but then the movement was coopted in the same way you're describing. The initial impetus to the organic food movement was to try to and add something to the market. So you could say "this

is organic” and add something beyond just a price mechanism - this added some kind of additional value that signaled that this was a better quality. It sounds like a very similar thing is happening with geographical indication. There is an added value that’s supposed to elevate the price and protect the market a little bit. But then how quickly corporations coopt these movements. Have you seen these similarities?

BONANNO: Yes, very similar. First of all, a lot of these geographical indication labels have been actually coopted by corporate entities. For instance, the number one seller of organic products in the United States is Wal-Mart. This is an example of cooptation. Not only that, but Wal-Mart has also a policy to decrease its carbon footprint. In essence, these corporations are appropriating discourses that have been traditionally part of the opposition and they are making them symbols of their “progressive” activities. But they do not say that a) oftentimes they could not meet the goals they themselves set up and b) that they continue the policies of exploitation of their workers and suppliers with the same strategies and economic violence that they used in the past. This is particularly serious because they present an attractive façade that hides their actual power. Their control of the media and information makes this situation even worse. Their control of advertisement is monopolistic and it is way bigger than the old TV era of the 70s and 80s. Everywhere you go you see a corporate message about being pro-environmental. I’m going to spend more on that in my talk, but this is the crux of the issue. They are on both sides of the political debate. There are those who create the problems but those who present themselves as those that will also solve the problems.

COOPER: So is there no path forward?

BONANNO: My message is to be careful. We need to realize that we cannot accept a position in which the market is simultaneously the problem and the solution. I think that solutions that are market based are suspicious. In many cases, alternative and progressive messages call for a different type of consumption as the solution of current problems. But this type of approach will continue to reproduce the capitalist market and give power to the forces that

already control it. For instance, already all the major oil corporations are investing and promoting alternative, green energy. For the issue is technical (new energy sources) rather than political (who control the power). A real solution to the current problems should be certainly technical but also and, above all, political.

COOPER: Which is interesting because in one of your other books, *The Legitimation Crisis of Neoliberalism: The State, Will-Formation, and Resistance*, there is a discussion of agro-food resistance movements. You seem to express a slightly pessimistic concern about the feasibility of what is really possible through resistance. But I find it interesting that 1) food is such a powerful site around which organization can begin and 2) that the hegemony of capital, especially in its current neoliberal form, seems so quick to coopt such movements. So I wanted to ask what you thought about the role of food in resistance movements and, given the hegemony of neoliberalism, if these kinds of movements seem like an avenue towards something that is real, that provides a real alternative.

BONANNO: First of all, and if you believe in democracy and in establishing true democracy as I do, it is important to support resistance movements. I'm very critical of farmers markets, I'm very critical of urban gardens, etc., but at the same time it's important to recognize the effort and the power and the accomplishments of the men and women that are involved in these initiatives. It's these initiatives that need to be supported. At the same time though, a reflection on their limits ought to be carried out. We need to question the scope of their alternative dimension. How far they can really go in terms of actual change. This, in effect, is actually an exercise of critical theory. Critical theory is based on the notion of critique and critique means to see how far a particular action can go. Originally it was set up to talk about reason, it was Immanuel Kant, who asked how far reason can go to explain the world. This notion of how far something can go to achieve a particular goal is at the root of that particular way of thinking. So it's really important to see how much change initiatives can actually achieve. Therefore, the resistance movement in agri-food, and in other sectors of society, ought to probe this question of far the type of change that they propose can go. This is what I've tried to do in those publications that you've

mentioned. And particularly at, what I call, the corporatization of resistance. This is the process whereby corporations are coopting discourses that once were exclusively part of the domain of the left. What corporations do to obtain profit is retranslated into a narrative in which profit becomes almost invisible and progressive objectives are depicted as central. The reality is that profit is central and these progressive objectives are only instruments to achieve it. Because corporations now occupy spaces that were once part of the critique of their actions, the critics have lost their voices. They are lost in the corporate dominated cacophony.

COOPER: Do you see that as being more of a phenomenon in the Global North than the Global South?

BONANNO: Well the Global South has other problems, but I think this is generalized. For instance, NGOs – there is a great deal of talking about NGOs but again the idea is not to diminish or belittle the work that NGOs have done – but NGOs are also part of this process of corporatization. In other words, they need resources and they sometimes partner with these companies. And then there are other problems with the NGOs, that are illustrated in the literature quite clearly. They speak for groups that actually don't have a voice. And they take up their voice and speak for them, but like in a traditional system of democracy where the link between the ruler and the ruled is that the ruled eventually says something about the rulers': we vote, or we have street demonstrations and protests, so the rulers eventually go back to the ruled and say "OK, you want me back or not," right? When it comes down to NGOs, this link doesn't exist. They operate like bureaucratic committees which is something that neoliberalism emphasized very much. For instance, one of the interesting things about the WTO is that the WTO basically rules the global commerce but the people that are in charge of evaluating the WTO and maneuver the WTO are bureaucrats, which means nobody votes for people in the WTO. We vote for our political representative and then they create these committees, but some of those people are professional bureaucrats and they're in charge of handling political systems. So that is a setback, a democratic setback.

COOPER: Are there spaces of hope?

BONANNO: In the history of opposition to the capitalist system and in terms of democratization of social relations, the greatest advancements are associated with the strength of the labor movement. This is the case because labor is central in the reproduction of capital. Companies need labor to generate profit. This is a condition that has changed since the time Marx theorized it. And despite the many neo-Marxian critiques – such as that of Habermas that I discuss in my book *The Legitimation Crisis of Neoliberalism* – it remains fundamental. Therefore, the control of labor is the most decisive aspect of the power of capital. The entire process of Globalization that I analyzed in many of my books, is the historical attempt of the capitalist class to control labor and diminish the power of organized labor. When labor is disorganized, weak and defeated as a movement, social relations (i.e. the ways society works) remain firmly under the control of the capitalist class. The fact that, in recent decades, the rich got very rich and economic inequality reached record high levels is telling of the augmented power of the capitalist class vis-à-vis a weaker labor movement. Emancipatory advancements, such as in the areas of gender, race and ethnicity, are important. But they have not altered the balance of power in terms of labor relations and the control of the means of production. Large corporations and the global capitalist class remain in control. As indicated before, their power is greater now because of their colonization of narratives that have been the historical patrimony of the left. In essence, then, the real alternative is that of returning to a focus on labor and the revitalization of the labor movement. This is a process that needs to transcend the simple search for better wages and living conditions – albeit they remain fundamental – and involve a proposal that revolutionizes the way we think about humanity, the environment and freedom.

COOPER: Well, I think I'll leave it with that. I look forward to the talk. Thank you very much for your time.