
CONVENED BY ANA C. DINERSTEIN

This Forum discusses John Holloway’s Change the World Without Taking Power. Inspirational and provocative, the book is a call for emancipatory reflection and thus an important contribution to the politics of resistance of our times. Contributors to the Forum explore and engage passionately with the controversial arguments contained in the book, from ‘practical negativity’ and ‘anti-power’ as ways to radically trans-form the world, to the rejection of the state as a tool for revolutionary change. The authors, who include John Holloway himself, collectively push the discussion beyond their own limits, thus opening up an exciting polemic about the meaning of revolution today.

A call for emancipatory reflection: Introduction to the Forum

Ana C. Dinerstein

Not long ago, the demiurges of post-modernism seemed to have been relatively successful in spreading the idea that to change the world (or even to think about it) was the task of incorrigible activists, who deserved a special place in a museum of modern dreams. But in recent years, an extremely rich ‘repertoire of actions’ (Tarrow, 1995), from Chiapas to Seattle, from Buenos Aires to Mumbai, has made the absurdity of this belief apparent. ‘Another world is possible!’ has become the mobilising, utopian cry of our time; what unlocks the feelings of liberation, and allows the creation of new spaces for participation and debate, is precisely the vagueness of this statement. But is this imprecision also a symptom of the difficulty inherent in developing a general strategy, able to shelter and nurture the plurality of struggles while simultaneously providing political and ideological consistency to resistance?

The originality of the present moment lies in the way that the regaining of the streets by a variety of actors not only
represents a reaction to global neoliberalism and its consequences, but also shows an enthusiastic determination to discuss the meaning of revolution today. The present Forum is a contribution to this task. The debate within it about John Holloway’s book, *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*, has been inspired by previous debates and will, hopefully, encourage further polemics within *Capital & Class* and elsewhere.

The reasons for engaging with this particular book are several. It would be hard to refuse Holloway’s call for what Zizek (2002) has called ‘emancipatory reflection’. Holloway’s work has been welcomed across the world at a time when intellectual contributions to radical change are scarce. Holloway stands against both those who have succumbed to the sirens of either ‘empirical reality’ or abstract theory, and those who believe that the new anarchist times do not need any theoretical elaboration (see for instance Klein, 2003). Loyal to the autonomous spirit of his time, and enchanted by the Zapatista project, Holloway neither searches for confirmation of his theses, nor provides close answers to his questions.

Three key issues for Marxists and those advocating radical change, offered in the book and interconnected, constitute the kernel of this debate: the understanding of praxis as ‘practical negativity’; the idea of ‘anti-power’; and the rejection of the state as a tool for radical change.

As a continuation of his previous work, Holloway invites us to reflect on the weakness of what is conceived of as inalterably powerful, i.e. capital. He suggests that, in this world, it is only humans (rather than the fetishised forms of their work) who retain the capacity to create and change the world: ‘It is labour alone which constitutes social reality. There is no external force; our own power is confronted by nothing but our own power, albeit in alienated form’ (Holloway, 1993: 19). Capitalist contradictions are in no way external, but are in fact inhabited subjectivity. However, capitalist societies are based on permanent processes of ‘objectification of subjective doing’ (p. 27). By ‘doing’, Holloway means much more than work and physical action. ‘Doing’ is the movement of ‘practical negativity’: ‘doing changes, negates an existing state of affairs. Doing goes beyond, transcends’ (p. 23). The power implied in doing is negative: ‘The doing of the doers’, Holloway argues, ‘is deprived of social validation: we and our doing become invisible. History becomes the history of the powerful, of those who tell others what to do. The flow of doing becomes an antagonistic process in which the doing of most is denied, in which the doing of most is appropriated by the few’ (pp. 29-30).

The notion of subjectivity as negativity is powerful: ‘The world that we feel to be wrong’ (p. 3) must be negated, including our identity. But this presents a real problem to the organisation of resistance: one significant point of contention in Holloway’s proposal is that, whereas the negation of ‘what we are’ is essential to insubordination, the moment of negation cannot be grasped without considering the moment of reinvention of identities, organisations and strategies which follows negation. If class struggle is, as Holloway argues, ‘the struggle to classify and against being classified at the same time as it is, indistinguishably, the struggle between constituted classes’ (p. 143), how do we then theorise the struggle for human
realisation and social recognition against the expansion of indifference entailed in the expansion of value? In other words, if the ‘scream of insubordination is the scream of non-identity’ (p. 15), how do we nourish the revolutionary potential of new organisational forms of resistance like the World Social Forum, or the Brazilian landless movement *Movimento Sem Terra*, to use just two examples, which emerged as negation was taking place and which became the forms through which resistance asserts itself? Is it ‘practical negativity’, or rather the ‘contradictory tension’ between ‘negativity and positivity’ (Laclau & Mouffe, 1999) that gives rebellion its real force?

One lesson that can be learned from the Argentinian experience since December 2001 is that, on the one hand, the struggle to recompose the political fabric and develop new forms of democracy and participation by a variety of social movements fired directly at the heart of the system of corruption, exploitation and domination entailed by neoliberal stability. The rejection entailed in *Que se vayan todos!*—‘Out with them all!’—was followed by a moment of intense mobilisation and the emergence of new forms of resistance vis-à-vis the institutional crisis. Autonomous and ‘disorganised’ movements became central to political processes, thus overshadowing institutional politics.

On the other hand, the search for autonomy found its limits in the recomposition of state power in the hands of traditional political elites. Does this mean that there was no political change in Argentina after December 2001? Where do we look for ‘political changes’? The recomposition following the December crisis re-established the separation between ‘civil society’ and the ‘state’ in a way that intensified the social movements’ dilemma, brought about by ‘anti-politics’: the contradiction between the need to create a political movement able to coordinate action and dispute the power of the state, and the free development of a pluralist movement of resistance based on autonomous practices and self-affirmation (Dinerstein, 2004; 2003).

The second controversial issue in Holloway’s book is the idea that anti-power is the route to emancipation. Holloway is not concerned with strategic organisation, but rather advocates uncertainty and anti-power: ‘How can we change the world without taking power? The answer is obvious: we don’t know’ (p. 22).

What we do know is that practical negativity is anti-power, and anti-power means the rejection of any revolutionary project aimed at taking the power of the state. Following Holloway, ‘the problem of the traditional concept of revolution is perhaps not that it aimed too high, but that it aimed too low. The notion of capturing positions of power … misses the point that the aim of the revolution is to dissolve relations of power, to create a society based on the mutual recognition of people’s dignity’ (p. 20).

But is anti-power a real possibility, or a rhetorical device that reflects the fragmentation and uncertainty of our time? Does the defence of oppositional struggles, which embrace the idea of praxis as practical negativity, adequately engage with the reality of present struggles?

Does it give democracy—according to Löwy, the ‘absent concept’ in Holloway’s proposal—the central place that it deserves?
The third matter of discrepancy within this Forum is Holloway’s proposal that a revolutionary movement should not seize the power of the state. The impact of Zapatismo on the world lies, according to Holloway, in that it ‘moves us decisively beyond the state illusion ... The state illusion understands revolution as the winning of state power and the transformation of society through the state’ (2002: 157). That a revolutionary movement must have as its goal the taking of the power of the state is highly debatable. What seems to be clear is that to reject such a project is not the same as to deny that the state is, due to the very nature of capitalism, one of the main institutional forms of mediation of capitalist social relations of production and, therefore, of class struggle too.

Holloway made a significant contribution regarding this matter a long time ago, when he highlighted the fact that the state was not a thing but the political form of the social relations of capital (Holloway & Picciotto, 1977). One cannot get out of the ‘state-yes/state-no’ loop until one regards the state as such. As a social form, the state ‘is and is not’. Then, why should the possibility that the form of the state can be disputed and fought over on behalf of the interests of the majority be overruled by Holloway’s proposal? Is Holloway disregarding state power? If so, can the power of the state be disregarded? Or is the search for emancipation a contradictory process of going in, against and through the state? These and more questions are posed in the contributions that follow. In the end, ‘each thought is a force-field, and just as the truth-content of a judgment cannot be divorced from its execution, the only true ideas are those which transcend their own thesis’ (Adorno, 2000: 40-41). The polemic is open.  

Notes
2. I would like to thank Claire Rigby for her assistance in the editing of this Forum.

References
Sympathy for the devil?
John Holloway’s Mephistophelian Marxism

Alex Callinicos

John Holloway’s Change the World Without Taking Power stands alongside Hardt and Negri’s Empire as one of the two key texts of contemporary autonomist Marxism. This does not mean that the two books represent identical positions. Holloway makes much more of an effort to make his ideas accessible than Hardt and Negri do (although not wholly successfully). There are also important substantive differences: Holloway offers a cogent critique of Empire (pp. 167-75), to which Hardt and Negri, regrettably, have not responded in their new book Multitude.

Finally, the philosophical frameworks of the two books are quite different. Hardt and Negri rely on a Deleuzian vitalism that celebrates the fullness of Being. Holloway, by contrast, privileges negativity: ‘Rather than to St Francis of Assisi, perhaps communists should look to Mephistopheles, the negating devil in all of us’ (p. 226, note 15). Hardt and Negri are anti-humanist Marxists for whom Spinoza is the great anti-Hegel. But for Holloway, Marxism is a tributary of ‘negative thought’ (p. 8): it is the tradition of Lukács and the early Frankfurt school that provides the most important theoretical thread connecting this tradition to the present. In the celebrated opening sentence of Change the World Without Taking Power—‘In the beginning is not the word, but the scream’ (p. 1)—we should hear the echoes of Adorno’s Negative Dialectic.

This gives a particular tonality to Holloway’s humanism. Negativity, the scream, comes first not as an affirmation of our humanity but because of its denial (p. 25), and therefore presupposes ‘a notion of humanity as negation’ (p. 153). Subjectivity itself is defined in terms of negativity, as ‘the conscious projection beyond that which exists, the ability to negate that which exists and to create something that that does not exist’ (pp. 25-6). Indeed, the key to Holloway’s negative ontology is a radical subjectivism. Rather like Fichte, he takes subjectivity as ‘the starting point’, but a self-differentiating subjectivity that ‘can exist only in antagonism with its own objectification’ so that ‘it is torn apart by that objectification and the struggle against it’ (pp. 37-8).

Capital, as it strives to constitute itself from our labour, must accordingly be understood through the lens of this ‘binary antagonism between doing and
done’ (p. 41), or more specifically through that of fetishism, ‘the name that Marx uses to describe the rupture of doing’ (p. 43). What fetishism does is to petrify the flow of negativity; to persuade us to see the world as a set of stable objects and relations. The great error of mainstream, ‘scientistic’ Marxism was to take capitalism on its own, fetishised terms and analyse it as a totality of structures governed by objective laws. But Holloway’s refusal to take the world as ‘done’ takes him a long way beyond modes of production and the tendency of the rate of profit to fall: we should not think of chairs and computers as objects with a durable identity, though stars, not being human products, lie beyond the limits of doing.

Arguably, this kind of lapse into Fichtean subjective idealism was a possibility always inherent in Hegelian Marxism from the time of Lukácás and Korsch onwards. What is interesting here is less the familiar philosophical difficulties indicated by Holloway’s desire to liquefy chairs and classes into the flux of doing, than its political effects. Driving form analysis to its limit by conceiving capital purely as fetishism (or rather as fetishisation, since the struggle to conquer rebellious subjectivity is eternal) dehistoricises capital. Negri and the Regulation School are taken to task for their shared ‘paradigmatic approach’; that is, for distinguishing between historically specific phases of capitalist development. Negri and the Regulation School are taken to task for their shared ‘paradigmatic approach’; that is, for distinguishing between historically specific phases of capitalist development. Negri and the Regulation School are taken to task for their shared ‘paradigmatic approach’; that is, for distinguishing between historically specific phases of capitalist development. Negri and the Regulation School are taken to task for their shared ‘paradigmatic approach’; that is, for distinguishing between historically specific phases of capitalist development. Negri and the Regulation School are taken to task for their shared ‘paradigmatic approach’; that is, for distinguishing between historically specific phases of capitalist development.

As for the famous slogan ‘Change the world without taking power’, this is justified by a combination of misrepresentation and vagueness. Though Holloway says that ‘it is important to avoid crude caricature’, nevertheless the entire classical Marxist tradition is identified with a preoccupation with ‘the capturing of the state’ (p. 15). And what else is the following summary of Rosa Luxemburg’s views but the crudest of caricatures? ‘Struggle is not a process of self emancipation which would create a socialist society (whatever that might turn out to be) but just the opposite: struggle is an instrument to achieve a preconceived end which would then provide freedom for all’ (p. 127). One can see why Luxemburg should be an embarrassment for Holloway, since she combined a highly objectivist theory of crises with an exceptionally strong conception of struggle as a process of self-transformation (notably in The Mass Strike). But such genuine contradictions are distracting complexities for an argument that seeks to sweep all versions of Marxism but those sanctioned by Holloway onto the rubbish heap.

Vagueness conquers almost all when it comes to political strategy. Like Hardt and Negri, Holloway conceives the defeat of capital through the metaphor of flight, which takes the form of ‘the refusal of domination, the destruction and sabotage of the instruments of
domination ... a running away from domination, nomadism, desertion, flight’ (p. 205). But he goes beyond these now-familiar rhapsodies, acknowledging that ‘[t]o break from capital, it is not enough to flee’ (p. 208). This is for a familiar Marxist reason: ‘As long as the means of doing are in the hands of capital, then doing will be ruptured and turned against itself. The expropriator must indeed be expropriated’ (p. 209). But this expropriation cannot ‘be seen as a reseizure of a thing, but as the dissolution of the thing-ness of the done, its (re)integration in the social flow of doing’ (p. 210).

Holloway’s snake thus eats its tail: his entire argument traces the circle of subjectivity as negativity. But what ‘the dissolution of the thing-ness of the done’ means, in terms of concrete demands and struggles, remains a mystery. So, too, is how we are supposed to carry through this expropriation without—not capturing—but confronting and breaking the state, which may indeed be a fetishised form of social relations, as the Open Marxists constantly remind us, but is also nevertheless a harsh material reality that stands in the way of any movement that seeks to change the world. The materiality of the state no doubt depends on, amongst other things, our tacit or explicit acknowledgement of its power. But, as Holloway himself acknowledges, ‘[t]he fetish is a real illusion’ (p. 71): the implication is, surely, that political strategy cannot simply pretend the state does not exist. But then, this is a book that disavows strategy, and makes a virtue of its own lack of precision. Holloway admits: ‘Revolutionary change is more desperately urgent than ever, but we do not know any more what revolution means ... We have lost all certainty, but the openness of uncertainty is central to revolution’ (p. 215). An uncharitable reader might conclude that Change the World Without Taking Power seems often to affirm the primacy, not of the scream, but of the wish.

Notes


¡Que se vayan todos!
Out with them all!

Néstor López & Luis Menéndez

The super-limo of the general manager of the BBV—the most important Spanish bank in Argentina—drove solemnly through Solano, one of the poorest sections of Greater Buenos Aires. Let us use our imagination: it is sunset on the 19th and 20th of December 2001; on the eve of the year 2002. We can see this banker, sitting comfortably in his armchair in a luxurious apartment in a very exclusive neighbourhood. Sitting in front of his TV set, smoking his cigar—imported from somewhere in the Caribbean—watching the news that shows the mobilisation of the people in Buenos Aires. Demonstrators are stopping vehicles on the streets; most of them are doing this for the first time in their lives. Let’s imagine him absorbed, his eyes glued to the screen,
where the neighbours of some sections of the city of Buenos Aires, night falling, are hitting lampposts with stones ... with a piece of wood ... with a plastic bottle ... tac, tactac, tactactac ... steadily, without stopping. And let’s imagine the same general manager watching as these people and many others put on their walking shoes and march to the nearest park, or square, in the open air. It’s there that the tac, tactac, tactactac of the posts mingles with the clan, clanclan, clanclanclan of kitchen pans: a very strange and collective symphony.

Let us now imagine the feeling of apprehension that overcomes this man of high finance, as he watches Doña María, a recognised, decent housewife, walking side-by-side with a well-known prostitute from the neighbourhood: doctors and the unemployed; engineers and children; students and very old people, meeting in the streets. Each encounter giving birth to a flow of kisses, embraces; creating new friendships and even new couples! joining kitchen pans, empty bottles, tin and plastic cans ... And all making up an enormous orchestra, playing in the wind of the night: ¡Que se vayan todos!

Now let’s go back to the district of Solano, where the limousine was still making slow progress over the hungry mouths of the holes pitting the mud streets. The whole district—very poor, with thousands of unemployed or poorly-employed people—was astonished. Never before had such a luxurious car traversed those streets. But the neighbours knew that the Spanish gentleman would be in it, and that he was here to meet the piqueteros of the MTD [Unemployed Workers’ Movement], a group representing the unemployed.

The general manager had requested the meeting because he was worried by the ‘lack of judicial security’, as he put it, which had developed in Argentina following the popular revolt of December 19-20, 2001.

He had, at first, attempted to hold the meeting in his office, in Buenos Aires’s downtown financial district. ‘Not in your office but in our barrio [neighbourhood], with those involved present, in an assembly of piqueteros ... and in front of all our comrades,’ had been the piqueteros’ reponse. ‘If it is not in the barrio, there won’t be any meeting,’ they had insisted, to the astonishment of the Spanish banker.

The general manager got out of his limo, stepping into the mud—not with the regal appearance of a modern-day Francisco Pizarro, but confused, wondering why he had agreed to appear in this place where he was watched by smiling children and stray dogs. He sniffed the rotten smell in the air. Used to fine perfumes, he did not realise that the nauseating stench was coming from the stagnant water in a nearby ditch, hidden by a musty, yellowish cover of dust, and he put his right leg, up to the knee, straight into the putrid mud.

By the time he entered the MTD base he looked like a defeated, downhearted Captain Morgan, with his rigid wooden leg. Smiling, he tried some small talk and some purely formal questions, before he became serious and decided to get to the point. Then he said:

‘Is it really true that you do not want to take power?’ ‘Yes, it’s true,’ replied the piqueteros. ‘We do not want to take power into our hands.’ ‘But then ... what the hell do you want?’ ‘We want all of you to go away! We want capital to go away. We don’t want capital anymore; we don’t want to reproduce capital; we want dignity and social change.’
Neither the famous Double Hermeneutics that he had studied in the University of Madrid ('la Complutense'), nor the most modern of economic theories were of any use to him in understanding this reply. He left Solano absolutely confused. He felt so uneasy that, before getting back into his shiny limousine he stepped—again!—into the ditch, with his other leg—the one that had up-to-now been clean. And now he looked like an astonished pirate, his pride mutilated by the sticky mud all over his legs, and by the everyday ordinaryness of the barrio, prickling his eyes.

Let's imagine this same general manager later that night in bed beneath the smooth fabric of his expensive sheets, lying open-eyed, thoughtful; trying hard to find, within his store of ideas, an explanation that might help him to understand these crowds who do not want to take hold of power; who do not boast of taking hold of the state; who say only: Out with you! Out! Out! And he realises that these demonstrators are not organised into trade-unions, nor into the classic left-wing groups. There are no flags, no loudspeakers. Political parties, he thinks, always have a party line, and slogans; they always want something from the state; they have deputies, councillors; they elaborate projects; laws .... He knows, too, that left-wing parties always have a certain style of organisation: left-wing organisation. But among these people there are no fixed rules; they seem to have only one goal: Out with them all!

And, last but not least, let us imagine that the same gentleman—this general manager of a powerful bank—seems to find the answer some months later, while perusing books in a bookshop on one of the city's most fashionable avenues. He was looking for a tourists' guide to the Caribbean, of course—for his holidays—when all of a sudden, on one of the shelves, he sees a volume—a dark cover with yellow letters; the title 'Change the World Without Taking Power'; an illustration: beaten-up kitchen pans ....

Has he found an answer to the mystery? An answer he hadn't been able to find up until now? Could it be that the author of the book has discovered a way to change the world? Had the piqueteros from Solano read John Holloway's book before his encounter with them in the mud, surrounded by stray dogs? And the people who overflowed the Plaza de Mayo in December 2001: had they read the book before, and all of those who met in assemblies too, and those who were able to reopen closed factories?

Let us try to give him an answer: No. None of them had read the book. It was printed some months after the revolt that overthrew governments that December. Maybe quite a lot of them—the overwhelming majority—will never read it.

The manager will not find a precise answer to his doubts in this book, because there are no teleological truths amongst its pages. It does not indicate 'how' to change the world without achieving power. It deals with things that seem to have been there since the beginning of time. With phrases that emerge from the scream; from the rejection with which millions of people every day, everywhere and in different ways face the world of capitalism.

It denies with the rebels' denial. And while it asks questions about the questions, the book has no certain answers. Holloway writes in the first-person plural, making apparent the insubordination that we so often practice in silence; our resistances, small
but irreverent, to the forces that push us to reproduce capital.

There is no doubt that this is not a book that can be read with peace of mind. As soon as we open it, we want to argue with it, oppose it.

That is perhaps one of its principal merits: promoting discussion; pushing for debate. Its pages are not a proposal; they are a challenge. That is why one tries to find weaknesses; mistakes that might allow our return to what is ‘sure’, to the ‘one and only’ right path; to the traditional revolutionary canon. 

*Change the World Without Taking Power* is a book that appeals to us from the realm of the absurd, in the same spirit with which the *piqueteros* of Solano answered the general manager’s questions that afternoon, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. The same ‘absurd’ that resounded in the nights, in the pots and pans together with the smiles and the hope. The urgent and essential absurd: *Que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo*: Out with them all—each and every one of them!

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**Note**

The authors would like to thank Alba Invernizzi for the translation of this article from Spanish.

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**To change the world we need revolutionary democracy**

**Michael Löwy**

John Holloway’s book is a remarkable essay, thought-provoking and truly radical in the original sense of the word, of ‘going to the root of the problem’. Whatever its problems and weaknesses, it brings to the fore, in an impressive way, the critical and subversive power of negativity. Its aim is ambitious and topical: ‘sharpening the Marxist critique of capitalism’.

The key philosophical chapters of the book deal with fetishism and fetishisation. Creatively drawing on Marx, Lukács and Adorno, Holloway defines fetishism as the separation of doing from done, and the breaking of the collective flow of doing. This is a very insightful viewpoint; but Holloway seems to identify all forms of objectivity with fetishism. For instance, he complains that, in capitalism, ‘the object constituted acquires a durable identity’. Well, would a good chair produced in socialism not become ‘an object with a durable identity’? His refusal to distinguish between alienation and objectivation (cf. note 22 of ch. 4)—a mistake the young Lukács did not make, in spite of his late self-criticism of 1967—leads to a denial of the objective materiality of human products.

Another powerful argument is his criticism of ‘scientific Marxism’, i.e. those theories which attempt to enlist certainty on the side of socialism, and which claim to explain and predict historical change according to ‘scientific laws’. This section is one of the most important of the book, and a significant contribution to a critical Marxist approach to politics.

Among the ‘scientific Marxists’, Holloway includes Kautsky, Lenin’s ‘What is to be done?’ (1902), and Rosa Luxemburg’s ‘Reform or Revolution?’(1899).
However, he seems to ignore the latter's pamphlet on 'The Crisis of Social Democracy' (1915), which represents a radical methodological break with the doctrine of scientific certainty, thanks to a decisive new formulation: the historical alternative between 'socialism or barbarism'. This essay is a real turning point in the history of Marxism, precisely because it introduces the 'principle of uncertainty' into socialist politics.

Now I come to the main bone of contention, which gives the book its title: changing the world without taking power. Holloway suggests, at first, that all attempts at revolutionary change so far have failed because they were based on the paradigm of change through winning state power.

However, as he acknowledges in note 8 of p. 217, historical evidence is not enough, since all attempts to change the world without seizing power have also failed, so far. He attempts, therefore, to ground his claim on the distinction, introduced in chapter 3 but which pervades the whole book, between 'power-to'—the capacity to do things—and 'power-over'—the ability to command others to do what one wishes them to do. Revolutions, according to Holloway, should promote the first and uproot the second. I must confess that I am not persuaded by this distinction. I think that there can be no form of collective life and action of human beings without some form of 'power-over'.

Let me try to explain my objections. They have to do with the idea of democracy: a concept that hardly appears in the book, or which is dismissed as a 'state-defined process of electoral influenced decision making' (p. 97). I have to disagree. I believe that democracy should be a central aspect in all processes of social and political decision-making, and particularly in a revolutionary process—an argument presented by Rosa Luxemburg in her (fraternal) critique of the Bolsheviks ('The Russian Revolution', 1918). Democracy means that the majority has power over the minority. Not absolute power: it has limits, and it has to respect the dignity of the other. But still, it has power-over. This applies to all kinds of human communities, including the Zapatista villages.

For instance: in 1994, after twelve days’ fighting, the Zapatistas decided to stop shooting and to negotiate a truce. Who decided? The Zapatista villages discussed the matter, and a majority—perhaps there was even a general consensus—decided that armed fighting should cease. The villages then gave the order to the commanders of the EZLN to cease fire: they had power over the commanders.

And, finally, the commanders themselves obeyed the orders of the villages, and instructed the Zapatista fighters to stop shooting: they had power over them. I don't pretend that this is a precise description of what happened, but it is an example of how democracy requires some forms of 'power-over'.

One of my main objections to Holloway's discussion of the issue of power, anti-power and counter-power is its extremely abstract character. He mentions the importance of memory for resistance, but there is very little memory, very little history in his arguments; very little discussion of the merits or limits of the real historical revolutionary movements either Marxist, anarchist or Zapatista, since 1917.
In one of the few passages in which he mentions some positive historical examples of anti-fetishism and self-determination, Holloway refers to ‘the Paris Commune discussed by Marx, the workers’ councils theorised by Pannekoek, and the village councils of the Zapatistas’ (p. 105).

Yet it is demonstrable that, in each of these examples, there were forms of democratic power requiring some form of power-over. In the Paris Commune there was a new form of power: no longer a state in the usual sense, it was still a power, democratically elected by the people of Paris in a combination of direct and representative democracy, and it had power over the population with its decrees and decisions.

It had power over the National Guard, and the commanders of the Guard had power over their soldiers (‘let’s go and put up a barricade on Boulevard de Clichy!’). And this power—the democratic power of the Paris Commune—was literally ‘seized’, beginning with the act of seizing the material instruments of power: the cannons of the National Guard. As for the council communist Anton Pannekoek, he wanted ‘all power for the workers’ councils’, and he saw the councils as a means for the workers ‘to seize power and to establish their domination over society’ (from a 1938 essay by Pannekoek).

What I feel is also lacking in Holloway’s discussion is the concept of revolutionary praxis—first formulated by Marx in the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’—which for me is the real answer to what he calls the ‘tragedy of fetishism’ and all its dilemmas: how can people so deeply enmeshed in fetishism liberate themselves from the system? Marx’s answer is that, through their own emancipatory praxis, people change society and change their own consciousness at the same time. It is only by their practical experience of struggle that people can liberate themselves of fetishism. This is also why the only true emancipation is self-emancipation, and not liberation ‘from above’.

Any self-emancipatory action, individual or collective, however modest, may be a first step towards the ‘expropriation of the expropriators’. But I don’t believe that any and every ‘No’, however barbaric, can be a ‘driving force’, as Holloway suggests on p. 205: I don’t, for example, think that suicide, going mad, terrorism, and other sorts of anti-human responses to the system can be ‘starting points’ for emancipation. I like the conclusion of the book—without an ending. We are all seeking our way; no one can say he has found the true and only strategy. And we all have to learn from the living experience of struggles, like those of the Zapatistas ...

Note:
Hopeful voyage; uncertain point of arrival?

Alberto R. Bonnet

*Change the World Without Taking Power* is an extraordinary book. It’s a ship that weighs anchor in search of the contemporary meaning of the revolution; that clearly perceives the reefs confronting its adventure and, notwithstanding its uncertain end, advances convinced of its arrival in port. Our critique can only be, then, an internal one—in both the standard sense of the word, and in the more intimate sense that, in these pages, we’ll be travelling together.

John Holloway is right in supposing that the starting point of a revolutionary critique is negativity: the rejection of our daily experience of the relations of exploitation and domination inherent in capitalist society. This starting point restores us, damaged subjects, into the core of this revolutionary critique and, at the same time, demands of us a negative dialectic—in Adorno’s sense—as a dialectic of the revolution. And this starting point also restores the notion of fetishism—in the footsteps of the young Lukács—as the key notion of the Marxist critique of capitalist society. A great deal of the best pages in Holloway’s book reflects on these notions of fetishism and negativity as, for example, he outlines the contention between the traditions of Marxism as critique and Marxism as positive science; or the difference between hard fetishism and fetishisation-as-process, revealing its revolutionary thinking.

This is a good point of departure. But there is no point of departure, no matter its theoretical firmness, that can guarantee us in advance that we will reach a good political port. I think that Holloway’s hopeful voyage, notwithstanding his capacity to navigate, has lost its direction and could take us to an unexpected point of arrival; that is to say, to postmodern politics, i.e. versions of liberal politics, instead of to revolutionary politics.

The first reef that Holloway confronts on his trip is that of class reductionism. Holloway seeks to resolve the important political problem of class antagonism by avoiding reducing the diverse social subjects into one—i.e. the working class—and, at the same time, by diluting them into a multiplicity of the so-called social movements. His manoeuvre consists, then, of redirecting those subjects and struggles into a common, binary antagonism, between power-to and power-over, which fractures the social flow of doing in capitalism. This manoeuvre is virtuous for many reasons. One of them refers to praxis—unsuccessfully. Whereas his argument seeks to specify the nature of the antagonism between power-to and power-over, it cannot distinguish it from the antagonism between labour and capital, nor derive from this antagonism the multiplicity of social subjects and struggles. How to derive patriarchy, for example, from an antagonism between power-over and power-to, which cannot be discerned from the antagonism between capital and labour? Do the capitalist market and the state exercise their power through the identification of the working class as a class, or through the atomisation of this class identity into an aggregate of citizens and sellers of their labour power? The manoeuvre leads, then, to an undifferentiated aggregate of social subjects and struggles, with non-identity as a criterion for aggregation. Holloway associates these subjects and struggles
with workers and class struggle in a broader sense, certainly, but his own suppression of any criterion justifying this association, *malgré lui-même*, spreads fertilizer on the populism of postmodern politics.

The second reef that Holloway confronts is the reduction of the capitalist state to an instrument and, once again, this is another decisive political problem for revolutionary thinking. Recovering his previous critical insight into the state as a form of capitalist social relation, with reference to the German debate of the *Staatsableitung*, Holloway can face this reef successfully.

The capitalist state is not a neutral tool that can be used for building an emancipated society and, consequently, the revolution cannot be conceived as simply taking state power. Perhaps Holloway exaggerates the degree to which revolutionaries of the past conceived the revolution in such a simple manner, but his argument against simplistic conceptions of revolution as taking the power of the state is conclusive, correctly posing a problem that is still vital for revolutionary politics. Holloway restates the question of what is to be done with the capitalist state, from the point of view of the revolutionary. But he risks his ship in a more turbulent sea when he tries to find an alternative answer to this question.

The manoeuvre consists, here, of the movement from the affirmation that revolutionary politics cannot be centred on taking the power of the state as an instrument, to the affirmation that the state itself is not central to power relations in capitalist society. This last statement contradicts one of the key premises of the critique of the state as a form of capitalist social relations: the separation between the political and economic spheres in capitalist society. The state is *the place of power* because of this separation between the political and the economic. Hence the particularisation of the state is an illusion—but an objective illusion, with effects that cannot be disdained.

Holloway’s manoeuvre results in a paradoxical conclusion: that the question of what is to be done with the capitalist state from a revolutionary perspective becomes unimportant, since the state is only one amongst other centres of power relations within capitalist society. This manoeuvre leads us to the micro-politics of the postmodernists, instead of to revolutionary politics.

Holloway’s ship is damaged after having confronted the aforementioned reefs. The images in the book’s last pages—images of a merely expressive quasi-politics (*a politics of events*), constituted by an aggregate of diverse, undifferentiated activities (*an area of activity*), prosecuted by an aggregate of equally undifferentiated social movements (*a space of anti-power*)—reveal that damage. Holloway insists that these are images of revolutionary politics. And he can rightly say that his point of departure, his charts, and the reefs he confronts on his travels, belong to a rich tradition of revolutionary thinking. But this argument is not enough. Holloway does not offer any criterion that could justify the classification of the politics of events as revolutionary politics, and so it remains associated with postmodern politics. It is not by chance that *Change the World*, along with Negri and Hardt’s *Empire*, was received as a postmodern political manifesto during the revolutionary days of the beginning of 2002 in Argentina.
Contemporary struggle in Europe: ‘Anti-power’ or counter-power?

Andrew Mathers & Graham Taylor

As soon as you abandon the idea of the state merely as an institution, as a function, and begin to recognise it as a form of social relations, a completely new way of struggle opens up. It is possible to see many courses of action that can challenge the form of the state’s processes whilst we stay within the state. That is the point: such actions cannot be taken from outside the state, only from within. (London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group [LEWREG] 1980: 77)

To struggle through the state is to become involved in the active process of defeating yourself (Holloway, 2002: 214).

Much has happened in the decades spanning these two quotations. The collapse of state socialism has demonstrated the contradictions of seizing state power, and the retreat of social democracy has reinforced the limits of reformism. The pervasive pessimism of postmodernism has been challenged recently by an optimism based on the wave of struggles that began with the Zapatistas’ rebellion in Chiapas. The utopian hope that ‘another world is possible’ articulated by the anti-capitalist movement has not, however, been accompanied by a realistic strategy for its achievement. It is becoming increasingly apparent that there is a need to reconstruct the links between academics and activists in order to produce insights into the ways in which everyday struggles intersect with capitalist power. The work of John Holloway contributed to significant conceptual advances in our understanding of social form and everyday struggle in the debate that dominated the cse, and the pages of Capital & Class, during the late-1970s and the early 1980s. To what extent, however, does Change the World Without Taking Power contribute to our understanding of social form and everyday struggle in the twenty-first century?

The earlier debates highlighted the extent to which capitalist power is embedded in the processes of abstraction that constitute the totality of the capital relation. The fetished and ‘thing-like’ appearance of money and the state is not illusory, but expresses the reality of how social relations are mediated within a capitalist social order. The social forms of capital are thus both the object and the result of class struggle: the imposition and refusal of bourgeois forms of domination. The contradictory determination of the state provided the space for an oppositional politics that overcame the fetished categories of ‘worker’, ‘client’, ‘patient’, etc. The cse was an effective vehicle for translating this theory into a form that was practically useful for state workers, council tenants and claimants, engaged in everyday struggles in and against the state. In Change the World, Holloway suggests that, today, such a politics would be ‘self-defeating’, owing to the ways in which the purity of oppositional struggle would be corrupted by the power relations of capital. He suggests that what is now required is a politics of ‘autonomy’ and ‘anti-power’, in order to articulate a negative ‘scream of refusal’. We would like to highlight several theoretical and practical difficulties with this proposition, in the context of examples of everyday struggle in contemporary Europe.
The main theoretical problem is that there exists an inconsistency between the more abstract model of the state developed by Holloway, and the way in which Holloway presented the state as an object of everyday struggle. This inconsistency contributes to Holloway’s rejection of contemporary struggles focused on the state, and to a flawed understanding of the anti-capitalist movement. In Holloway’s earlier work, there is an inconsistency between the proposition that the state is an ‘expression of the crisis of the capital relation expressed in a political form’ (Holloway & Picciotto, 1991: 133), and Holloway’s tendency to separate the state as an ‘apparatus’ and the state as a ‘social relation’, when discussing everyday struggle (Holloway, 1991: 248). As Clarke (1991: 64) correctly noted at the time, this separation of form and content risked a relapse into structuralism and the notion that the state apparatus is class neutral: as Clarke also noted, Holloway avoided the resulting theoretical confusion by recourse to ‘populist anti-theoreticism’. The same theoretical confusion seems to underlie Holloway’s current rejection of engagement with the state.

The neoliberal restructuring of the state has excluded and marginalised labour, but this exclusion can never be total owing to the contradictory determination of the state as a social form. The same theoretical confusion has thus led Holloway to draw a diametrically-opposed conclusion regarding the state and everyday struggle two decades later.

Holloway’s argument for a politics beyond the state is premised on the failure of Leninism, and an appeal to the general anti-theoreticism of the anti-capitalist movement, rather than on a careful assessment of how neoliberal restructuring has changed the terrain of everyday struggle. The reassertion of the liberal moment of the state has closed down oppositional spaces within the state, while the processes through which the state ensures capitalist reproduction have been effectively depoliticised. This can be seen in the ways in which the state sponsors various forms of ‘strategic partnership’, as with the encouragement of initiatives such as PPPs (Public Private Partnerships) and PFIs (Private Finance Initiatives).

However, these developments suggest to us a strategy based not on a disengagement from a politics of state power, but a reengagement and, indeed, an intensification of struggle in and against the state. Indeed, we can see this occurring in contemporary struggles across Europe.

Holloway (2002: 97) claims the sans papiers as a movement of ‘anti-fetishisation’. The main demand of the movement, however, is for residence papers: a demand for identification by the French state. The association of the sans papiers with groups campaigning for radical goals like ‘no borders’ suggests that linking everyday struggles with radical social change can be conceptualised as in, against and through the state. The struggle over council housing in the UK highlights this argument further. In the context of council tenants being consulted on options for the transfer of housing stock out of local authority control, tenants’ groups and housing workers organised by UNISON have been campaigning, along with the Campaign to Defend Council Housing, to maintain local authority control. Do we reject such struggles owing to the antagonistic relationship housing workers and tenants have with the state, and argue...
instead for what Holloway describes as ‘autonomous community projects’ (ibid: 21)? The latter would suggest the establishment of housing cooperatives and a defence of their autonomy from incorporation into state control. This, however, would shift the struggle onto the terrain of the associational politics of the Third Way, and compound the depoliticisation of public housing provision.

A more positive strategy might involve a reassertion of the contradictory relationship between the working class and the welfare state, and a reengagement in struggle over the form of the state.

In practice, this might mean mobilising an alliance of tenants, workers and housing activists around not just the demand for retaining council control of housing, but also for increased spending and new democratic structures for controlling housing provision.

This struggle demonstrates the potential for developing alliances that challenge the fragmentation of the working class into categories (tenant, worker, etc.) through which it is incorporated into the state through various partnership arrangements. Such a challenge would also involve the transformation of ‘working class’ organisations and, in particular, would mean breaking the unions from social partnership and their reorientation around social movement unionism (SMU).

Holloway, however, seems to consign the labour movement to ‘instrumentalism’, and thereby to complicity in neoliberal restructuring. But the situation in contemporary Europe is contradictory, since the dominant strategy of ‘social partnership’ is challenged by a counter-tendency of SMU, exemplified by the French union Solidaires, Unitaires, Démocratiques (SUD). SUD was formed as a grass-roots union, and has its power-base amongst the most militant sections of public-sector workers. It has used its resources to help mobilise a wide array of social forces against the social consequences of neoliberal restructuring, which have become known collectively as the sans.¹

There is, of course, a real danger of this new militancy becoming incorporated into the French state, but this is an unavoidable hazard facing all struggles in and against the state. To argue for the development of anti-power is to side-step the problem and, frankly, does little to assist militants with the real dilemmas they face in their everyday struggles.

Rather than making an intellectual contribution to resolving these issues faced by collective organisations, Holloway retreats into a celebration and justification of individual acts of resistance. However, surely a major challenge for engaged intellectuals today, and especially the CSE, remains just as it was more than 20 years ago:

New relations established between capital and labour are not only an indirect response to working class struggle, they also inevitably [original emphasis] shape that struggle and call forth new forms of organisation...

One consequence of the neglect by Marxist theory of the analysis of this historical development of everyday relations between the state and the working class is that there has been little attempt to understand these changes in organisational form. (LEWRG, 1980: 68)
In the context of neoliberalism, these comments would seem to be more, rather than less, relevant. For academics, it is not enough to champion a ‘politics of events’ as pure expressions of anti-power.

Rather, it is necessary to provide an analysis of the new terrain on which everyday struggles are being waged. Moreover, as LEWRG argued, it is through such struggle that the process of ‘revolution’ is advanced. The aim is to encourage a ‘culture of opposition’, and democratic organisations as forms of counter-power that prefigure socialist forms of existence.

Reconvening the LEWRG would require a trip on the East Coast Mainline railway. The loss of life at the Hatfield and Potters Bar crashes reveals the real cost of a London-to-Edinburgh weekend return on a privatised railway system.²

This is the kind of issue around which academics and activists can productively engage in order to renew a politics that is in, against and beyond the state.

Notes
1. *Sans travail*—unemployed; *sans logis*—homeless; *sans papiers*—without documents. The ‘*sans*’ are all lacking rights to a decent existence, and share a common demand for a guaranteed income.
2. The authors wish to thank Alex Gordon for information and ideas about railway privatisation.

References

Nouns and verbs; or, Holloway’s understanding of revolution

Pablo Ghigliani

*Change the World Without Taking Power* has already been widely debated, especially as regards the political connotations of the book. For that reason, it is difficult for the reviewer to fuel the political debate with fresh considerations; but a short comment on the theoretical ground of the argument may hold interest, nevertheless.

If the core of the book is the notion of fetishism, its starting-point is the scream against the horrors of capitalism: a two-dimensional scream that comprises rage and hope, and which is rooted in the experience of the evil of capital, and the projection beyond it of an alternative otherness. Thus, Holloway stresses once and again that the starting-point is an active refusal: a scream that implies a doing that points to the negation of what exists; doing not just as work, but as the whole movement of practical negativity. Then, the base
of his theoretical reflection would be the ‘scream-doing’ and its movement against limits, against containment, against closure: in short, subjectivity.

Although Holloway qualifies this starting-point as a concrete scream-doing against the misery of capitalist society, I would argue that this is just the rhetorical point of departure of his argument.

Holloway does not offer any characterisation of the kind of negative practice involved in this scream-doing, except for a short list of empirical examples composed of some predictable collective struggles and individual acts. On the contrary, the actual starting-point of the argument is the most abstract and universal notion of human doing imaginable, but not the negative practice that arises from our active scream of opposition to capitalism.

Holloway’s real premise is the amorphous social flow of doing, in which ‘past doing (of ourselves and others) becomes the means of doing in the present’ and ‘our doings are so intertwined that it is impossible to say where one ends and another begins’ (p. 22).¹

Furthermore, the material constitution of the ‘we’ who scream is the outcome of ‘the conscious and unconscious, planned and unplanned, braiding of our lives through time’ (p. 22)—not the result of the movement of negative practice.

After posing this theoretical premise Holloway shows, by analysis, that embedded in the social flow of doing lies a power-to-do, ‘a uniting, a bringing together of my doing with the doing of others’ (p. 24). Power-to will be the implicit material substratum that becomes power-over when both doing and its social flow are broken by the separation and private appropriation of the done.

It is the critique of this separation—of done from doing, of existence from constitution, of conception from realisation, of subject from object—that leads the argument to its ‘turning point’: the vulnerability of power-over; in other words, the dependence of the powerful on the powerless, of the done on the doer.

However, in order to grasp the source of this vulnerability it is crucial to understand, first, that the antagonistic mode of existence of the broken doing is the movement of the antagonistic relations between contents and the forms of existence of these contents.

Power-to; doing; done, are the contents dominated and denied by their social forms—power-over; labour; capital. In short, the whole secret resides on quite a simple point: that no matter how much the done dominates and denies the doing, the done depends absolutely on the doing for its existence. Everything else is an illusion, albeit a very real one.

By this analytical path we arrive at the notion of fetishism which is, according to Holloway, the way in which the rupture of doing was conceived of by Marx. Then, the last theoretical step of the argument will be to infuse movement into the notion of fetishism, by transforming the hard approach into a form-process approach: fetishisation.

In my view, there are some fatal flaws in this argument. To begin with, changing the world is reduced by Holloway to the emancipation of universal and trans-historical contents—power-to, doing, done—by the dissolution of the social forms that deny them—power-over, labour, capital. By overemphasising the status of form as denial, the argument
neglects the analysis of the complex links between content and social form. The material and social development of the contents has no role to play in the transformation of the social forms in which they exist, and vice versa. There is no room in the argument to wonder—even within the boundaries of capital—how far, say, different technologies, or different ways of organising labour processes, or different forms of property, or different forms of exercising collective authority, push or prevent the further socialisation of doing and done.

Similarly, despite all the rhetorical energy expended in talking about movement and processes, this mode of reasoning fails to offer a truly historical account of social change. There is history—albeit mythical—in the transition from feudalism to capitalism; but once capital is onstage, we are left with the never-ending circular genesis of forms. It is arguable that this approach is only possible when the theoretical connection between social forms and contents is broken.

Consequently, it is not surprising that, for instance, the crucial difference between primitive accumulation and the reproduction of capital is blurred. History, as the place where real illusions are not dissolved theoretically, becomes contingent.

Between the ‘real’ and the ‘illusion’, Holloway opts to downplay the former and emphasise the illusory side of any form of capital brought about by the self-negation of doing. Where, then, does the power of capital to perpetuate the illusion come from? In the face of an argument that refuses to concede a role to the notion of structure as the historical crystallisation of human practices, should not we finally draw the conclusion that the survival of power-over is just the outcome of our damaged consciousness?

The book is often accused of failing to deliver what it apparently promises in the title. In my view, this is just a formal and superficial claim: nobody can honestly expect to find this kind of practical answer in a book. Instead, beyond the question of whether or not we should take power in order to change the world, the problem is that, given his theoretical horizons, Holloway offers no clue as to how we might embark on the task of revolutionising both social forms and their material contents.

Thus, he limits himself to discovering the verbs hidden behind the nouns that constitute the language of domination; to bringing instability to the world by opening up, on paper, the categories of Marxism; and to conjuring the power of capital away by repeating that it depends on us.

Unfortunately, these are banal remarks; for the material dependence on the sale of labour power that affects the daily lives of the vast majority of us is not dissolved by a movement of words. Without conceptual mediations, the truism of abstract formulations becomes practical disorientation; social forms are emptied of material determinations. The power of capital stays mysterious. Even worse, we feel guilty about this power.

Yet why have hundreds of political and social activists taken this argument as a theoretical expression of their own practice? Why does this segment of political militants, who years ago would have thought of themselves in rather vanguardist terms, reject the old imagery and find the discourse of anti-power feasible? Why, indeed, when they are often involved in daily negotiations and confrontations with the state? Why does a sophisticated and vanguardist
argument appeal to anti-intellectual and anti-vanguardist trends?

These are questions without obvious answers. To find them, I think that we should take seriously the methodological principle by which categories of thought are understood as manifestations of the reality to which they refer. Thus, we may interpret the success of this book as an expression of the present fragmentation of collective struggles, as well as of the disillusionment of a whole generation of political activists with the bureaucratic and dogmatic practices of the traditional left.

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**The state as a contradiction**

**Mabel Thwaites Rey**

In these notes, I want to discuss some topics related to the concepts of state and power that John Holloway proposes. Holloway says that ‘the objective of taking power inevitably involves an instrumentalisation of the struggle’, and that ‘[o]nce the logic of power is adopted, the struggle for power is already lost’.

However, he also warns that things are not immutable but that, at the same time, they express their negation. But if there are no identities, why, in that case, is the struggle for power always a vehicle for instrumentalisation? If there is always a contradiction between what is and what is not, and if this contradiction is what allows us to think about change, why is it, then, that the objective of defeating power is inevitably a way to the instrumenta-lisation of every struggle?

I do not think that by saying we are going to ‘eliminate’ power by the simple mandate of our will, we can resolve the multiplicity of issues that this involves. Because if this decree of our will is really relevant, it must necessarily be collective; and where there is a collective, there is a need to assume the disputes that the non-desired manifestations of power imply. If clear rules and mechanisms with which to resolve conflicts are not created, these conflicts will eventually be resolved somehow, but without any guarantee of respect for the collective will.

Holloway proposes the concept of ‘anti-power’ as a way of resolving the complex question of power. This means that power over others can be dissolved through the decision of an autonomous will, which refuses to be subjugated, and refuses to reproduce the existing order. The question seems more complex than the solution he proposes.

How do we build a non-power society in the midst of one in which the real power not only exists, but also oppresses us? Holloway’s solution is to ignore this power.

Understanding what the struggle for power means, and the enormous perils that it entails, is a very good starting-point for thinking about new forms of democratic, participative and horizontal ways of political articulation. But the crucial problem is not yet solved: how to confront, in an effective and concrete way, such a ‘powerful power’? The
opposite of power is not necessarily anti-power; it may well be simple impotence. And the scream of the oppressed that cannot be potent may be even more frustrating.

How to go from individual rejection; from the oppressed scream of each person; from the act of hurling away the alarm clock that calls us each morning to the slavery of tedious work, to a concrete and common action, capable of expressing the disruptive power in the rejection of this oppressive system? How can a scream, a rejection, tie us together in a socially useful way, i.e. with relevant effects for the whole?

There is a problem in Holloway’s approach. The neoliberal hegemony has been accompanied by high levels of despair with regard to political activity (reformist, revolutionary or anarchist). This has been a clear victory for neoliberalism. The loss of confidence in political action has strengthened the world of capital for decades. Not in vain have the beneficiaries of capitalism been fighting to reduce the role of the state as an articulator of wider social interests. Holloway states, correctly, that

The fact that [the state] exists as a particular or rigidified form of social relations means, however, that the relation between the state and the reproduction of capitalism is a complex one: it cannot be assumed, in functionalist fashion, either that everything that the state does will necessarily be in the best interests of capital, nor that the state can achieve what is necessary to secure the reproduction of capitalist society. The relation between the state and the reproduction of capitalist social relations is one of trial and error. (2002: 143-144)

This point is crucial. If the state is one form of a contradictory social relation, its actions and its very morphology reflect this contradiction. This is also expressed in workers’ battles for better living conditions. Since the state is more than the mere expression of capital’s logic, it should not be forgotten that is in the state apparatus that the complex relations of force that specify the capitalist social relation understood as a whole, materialise. Therefore, the form taken by the capitalist state cannot be a matter of indifference to workers. It is not the same thing to have protective labour laws as it is to have job flexibility. It is not the same to have legally-guaranteed social security benefits as to leave them to the movement of market forces. Workers’ historical achievements should be defended, not with reference to a mythical welfare state that has never trespassed capitalist frontiers, but with reference to the social dimension that should resolve the interests of the majority.

It should be noted that the state is synonymous with repression but, to paraphrase Holloway, it-is-is-not-and-may-be (is-is-not-and-could-be) protection for the weak too. The rich have always wanted ‘less state’, to pay less ‘common expenses’, and to invest the minimum in legitimating their dominant place within the social structure. Therefore, it is this contradictory dimension of the state that should be recovered. Fighting in and against the state at the same time is fighting to eliminate its repressive forms, and to widen what it has of collective sociability. Of course, Holloway would say, this is impossible because the state is a form of social relations.

This line of reasoning ends up in a cul-de-sac: if the state is a monolithically-
defined form, then we are falling into the thing-ness that destroys the contradictory dimension whose existence Holloway notes within capitalist social relations, and which allows us to think about change and rupture with the present. Following this rationale, we can say that, as is any form, the state is and is-not.

Tearing away that which is-not, taking possession of it, snatching it in the popular interest, should be part of the struggle: it cannot be left outside. Because far from avoiding, as Holloway says, being trapped by the logic of power, to turn our back on this struggle is to glorify it as an immovable thing-ness.

Holloway on power and the ‘state illusion’

Atilio A. Boron

According to Holloway, ‘the nucleus of the novelty of Zapatismo is the project of changing the world without taking power’ (Holloway, 2001a: 174). In a penetrating literary metaphor, the Zapatistas proclaimed that ‘it is not necessary to conquer the world. It is enough to create it anew!’ Holloway argues that the innovation of Zapatismo allows the left to overcome the ‘state illusion’, a doctrinal relic linked to a state-centred conception of revolution in which the latter was assimilated to ‘the conquest of state power and the transformation of society by the state’ (ibid: 174). For Holloway, the classic Marxist controversy that contrasted reform with revolution hides, despite apparent differences, a fundamental agreement regarding the state-centred character of the revolutionary process. From there, he asserts that ‘the biggest contribution of the Zapatistas has been the breaking of the link between revolution and control of the state’ (ibid: 174). His reasoning not only has an undeniable merit of its own—inasmuch as the problems to which he refers are of great theoretical and practical transcendence—but it also illustrates a range of concerns and theoretical approaches common to a good part of the alternative and progressive thinking of the twenty-first century. In a previous work, this author had dealt extensively with the subject (Holloway, 1997). ‘The revolt of dignity’—he said on that occasion—‘can not aspire to take the power of the state’ given that ‘the rejection of state power is simply an extension of the idea of dignity’. And he completed his argument in the following way:

Let us briefly examine the various possible objections to Holloway’s assertion. In the first place, attention should be drawn to an ignored feature of fundamental importance in his
exposition: that it is capitalist society itself that has increasingly adopted state-centred features.

If, in classic Marxism, the relevance of the state as a social institution appears to be highlighted, this is for two good reasons. On the one hand, it is because Marxism as a social theory reproduces at the level of thought the events, processes and structures that exist in reality. It would be a major blunder if the evident ‘statification’ of capitalism were to pass unnoticed by Marxist theorists. On the other hand, it is because as a theory Marxism cannot—and should not—remain immune to the influence exerted over the exploited masses by the predominant form of organisation of the oppressors. This was perceived with unique clarity not only by such outstanding theorists and socialist leaders as Lenin and Gramsci, but also by intellectuals who are alien to Marxism, such as the German sociologist Georg Simmel. If capitalism increasingly stresses the state’s role in the perpetuation of its conditions of domination, it would not seem reasonable for its opponents to ignore that feature in order to concentrate their efforts—both in theory as well as in practical struggles—in other areas.

How to ignore the unabashed ‘statification’ of capitalist societies since the early 1930s? This phenomenon brought to the fore the importance of an essential feature of the capitalist state: its role as a focus where the powers – economic, political, and ideological – of the dominant classes were concentrated; its role as the organiser of capitalist domination and, simultaneously, as the principal ‘disorganiser’ of the subordinate classes. And even though the state has been weakened to a large degree in the peripheral countries, remaining at the mercy of the plutocracies that control the ‘markets’; even in these cases it has continued to faithfully fulfil the aforementioned tasks. An insurgent, anti-capitalist force cannot afford to ignore or underestimate such an essential aspect.

The governments of the industrialised democracies foster a doctrinaire crusade against the state, while in practice never ceasing to strengthen and assign new tasks and functions to it. Actually, the ‘state illusion’ would seem to be nested in those conceptions, which, despite evidence to the contrary, fail to distinguish between anti-state rhetoric and the ‘statifying’ practices of the capitalist governments. Or to perceive the ever-increasing strategic nature that the state has assumed in order to guarantee the continuity of capitalist domination.

The shortcomings of Holloway’s diagnosis become even more clamorous when he endorses an idea dear to neoliberal thinking, and to postmodernism in general, by affirming ‘that states are not the centres of power that they were assumed to be in the state-centred theories of Luxemburg and Bernstein’ (ibid: 174). This reasoning culminates by proclaiming the alleged disappearance of national capital, and its replacement by a global capital completely detached from a national-state base, and operating from the support that the globalisation of economic operations offers to it. (1) Several authors have shown the errors contained in this interpretation, and the damage it can cause to the anti-capitalist forces that may adhere to this perspective. The belief that the main players on the global economic scene—the huge ‘mega-corporations’—have become completely detached from any
‘national base’ is nothing more than a neoliberal legend disproved every single day. How can the supposedly ‘post-national’ character of large global corporations be reconciled with the fact that less than 2 per cent of executive board members of the American and European mega-corporations are foreign, and the fact that more than 85 per cent of all their technological developments originate from within their own ‘national’ borders? In spite of the global scope of their operations, which is not in question, Boeing and Exxon are American firms, just as Volkswagen and Siemens are German, and Toyota and Sony Japanese. When a government threatens their interests, or when an allegedly ‘disloyal’ competitor questions their market domination, it is neither the UN Secretary General nor the Security Council that intervenes in the affair, but rather the ambassadors of the United States, Germany or Japan, who try to correct the course and protect ‘their’ businesses. In the same line of reasoning, Ellen Meiksins Wood wrote not too long ago that ‘behind every transnational corporation there is a national base that depends on its local state to sustain its viability, and on other states to give it access to other markets and other labour forces’. The conclusion of Holloway’s analysis is that ‘the central point of globalization is the fact that competition is not only—not even principally—between individual firms, but between national economies. And as a consequence the nation-state has acquired new functions as an instrument of competition’ (2000: 116). That is why national states continue to be key players in contemporary capitalism.

But there are other problems that emanate from the idea of the ‘state illusion’. In multiple writings, Gramsci argued that the establishment of the ‘intellectual and moral’ hegemony is a condition of the conquest of political power, and of any possibility of the successful implementation of a radical project (1971: 56-59).

Thus, ‘intellectual and moral’ leadership and political domination are two inseparable sides of the one-and-only revolutionary coin: without the first, social insurgence falls in the quicksands of the logic of apparatuses, armed or otherwise; and without ‘power vocation’, the political struggle decays into an ethereal, postmodern cultural controversy.

It seems to us that in Holloway’s work the second part of the Gramscian programme—the section dealing with power, state control and domination—vanishes into thin air. A new world is not constructed, as Zapatismo wants, unless the correlation of forces is radically modified, and very powerful enemies are defeated. And the state is precisely the place where the correlation of forces is condensed. It is not the only place, but it is by far the most important one. It is the only one from which, for example, the victors can transform their interests into laws, and create a normative and institutional framework that guarantees the stability of their conquests. A ‘triumph’ on the plane of civil society is extremely important but lacks imperative effects—or does anyone doubt the clear victory that the Zapatistas reaped with the March of Dignity? Nevertheless, shortly thereafter the Mexican Congress enacted outrageous legislation that dated back to the worst moments of the crisis, and that was antithetical to the overwhelming ‘climate of opinion’ prevailing in civil society.
From the above it can be inferred that the idea of the ‘power illusion’, which includes the above and preaches the necessity of abandoning the conquest of political power, can no longer be acceptable. ‘It is not a project to make us powerful—says Holloway—‘but rather to dissolve the relations of power’ (2001a: 174).

We will concede by hypothesis that Holloway may be right, but we should also admit the legitimacy of the following questions: how can those crystallised power relations that, for example in Chiapas, have condemned the native people to more than five hundred years of oppression and exploitation be dissolved?

Is it reasonable to presume that the beneficiaries of an incurably inhumane and unfair system—the latifundistas (owners of large estates), the paramilitaries, the local political bosses, etc.—will humbly and peacefully accept their defeat in civil society and the breakage of their power structures, without offering a bloody resistance? How are those ‘alternative forms’ of social organisation and ‘the anti-state anti-power’ going to be constructed? Will it be possible for the revolution required in order to found these alternative forms to ‘advance just by asking’?

Holloway has argued that progressive forces cannot ‘first adopt capitalist methods (struggle for power) to later go in the opposite direction (dissolve power)’ (2001b).

It seems to me that the struggle for power, especially if we place it in the most concrete terrain of politics, and not in that of philosophical abstractions, cannot be conceived of as a ‘capitalist method’ based on the affirmation that the ‘existence of politics is a constitutive moment of the relation of capital’. What does this mean? That there was no politics before the birth of capital? Don’t we run the risk of culminating that reasoning by affirming that all that exists is nothing other than a reflection of the all-embracing power of capital? In that case, wouldn’t this lead us to a kind of ‘left-Fukuyamanism’, except that instead of celebrating the definitive triumph over capital, we are supposed to sing funeral marches for the contesting forces locked up forever in its supremacy?

References


Change the World Without Taking Power

John Holloway

The book is an invitation to discuss, and to all those who have commented on the book, however adverse their criticism, I am very grateful for their acceptance of the invitation.¹ The experience of the last two years has been rather like playing at the edge of the sea and being hit by big waves of enthusiasm and criticism which roll me over and over: an exhilarating and sometimes confusing experience, in which I occasionally lose the thread of the argument. Coming home to Capital & Class is perhaps a way of finding my feet before the next wave comes.

The central thread is that the struggle against capital is a struggle against fetishism, and that fetishism must be understood as a process of fetishisation. The argument has its roots in the CSE debates of the 1970s.² In the CSE State Group of that time, we developed an understanding of the state as a particular form of the capital relation: an aspect of the fetishisation of social relations under capitalism. In this, we were influenced by the German state derivation debate (see Holloway & Picciotto 1978), but sought to go beyond that debate, both politically and theoretically (see CSE State Group 1980, LEWRG 1979-1980). For me, the most important turning-point in that discussion was the argument that fetishism has to be understood not as fait accompli, but as process; as form-process or process of formation; as struggle.³

The book Change the World Without Taking Power is intended to draw out the implications of this argument—already considerably developed in the pages of Common Sense, and in the three volumes of Open Marxism. The distinction between fetishism-as-accomplished-fact and fetishism-as-process is important, because it is the dividing line between an authoritarian understanding of Marxism and a libertarian understanding.

To see fetishism as an accomplished fact leads to an elitist understanding of theory, and to the view either that revolution is impossible, or that it must be led by an emancipated vanguard acting on behalf of the working class: this leads to a focus on the state, which is precisely a form of organisation on behalf of; that is, a form of exclusion and repression.

To see fetishism as a process of fetishisation, on the other hand, is to start from a self-divided subject (of which theory is a self-contradictory moment) struggling (contradictorily) against its/our own alienation or fetishisation, driving towards social self-determination—necessarily pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps, as it were, because there is no possible saviour, no possible emancipated vanguard. The struggle starts from where we are and what we are; the struggle is a refusal of where we are and what we are: we are in-and-against, against-and-in. But more than that: in order to be sustained, the struggle in-and-against must become a moving against-and-beyond—a point being emphasised increasingly by the current struggles against capitalism.

To think of communism as a movement against fetishism is to set the stakes as high as possible, as I think Marx also did (but that’s not the point).⁴ A movement against fetishism is a moving against all that stands in the way of social self-determination; a drive towards
becoming our own true sun, without alibi or saviour. The drive towards social self-determination is global communism (commun-ism), because since all doings are interwoven, there is no other way in which to imagine social self-deter-
mination.

It is a drive against history understood as determination of the present by the past, since social self-determination is necessarily a liberation from determination by the past; a waking from the nightmare of history. It is a struggle to shoot clocks, break duration, dissolve the homogeneity of time; to overcome all separation between constitution and existence; to transform time-in, the ‘abstract and homogeneous progression leading from past to present to future’ into time-as, the ‘temporality of freely chosen actions and projects’ (Gunn, 1985). It is the revolt of verbs against nouns, for self-determination means a world of doings, of active subjects, not of objects.5

Communism, so understood, is both utopian star and urgent necessity. It is not a policy, or a model, or a set of rules; it is a direction, a moving beyond and towards. It certainly does not mean that there should be no engagement with existing capitalist forms, such as money and the state.6

On the contrary, it is precisely because such engagement is inevitable that it is important to understand the implications and the dangers. The state (or any fetishised form) involves a particular way of organising social relations, of subordinating relations between people to relations between things—a way that impedes the recognition and assumption of social human subjectivity. It would be lovely to turn our backs completely on the state and money, but generally we cannot do that—though certainly the Zapatistas’ Junta de Buen Gobierno are an impressive move in this direction. Most of us have to engage with the state and other capitalist forms in some way; but the question is, how do we do it? We recognise their specifically capitalist character; we criticise their form. We struggle in-and-against-and-beyond those forms; we try to see our own struggle as asymmetrical to the forms of capitalism; we try to establish other forms of organisation, forms that subordinate relations between things to relations between people.

That is what I mean by anti-power: the necessary asymmetry between our forms of organisation and capitalist forms. The asymmetry of form is no guarantee that the struggle will not be integrated into capital, but it is certainly an important way of fighting against it (as Marcos points out in his discussion of the practice of the Junta de Buen Gobierno in his ‘Leer un video’ communiqué of August 2004). What are these asymmetrical forms? This is always a matter of invention and experimenta-
tion; but the tradition of council organisation, and the concepts of direct democracy,7 horizontality and the overcoming of the separation between the political and the social are obviously central here.8

How to engage with the state or money or other capitalist forms is always a difficult question, and precisely for that reason we have to be aware that any engagement with the state pushes us in the direction of reconciliation with capital. Do we have to cede to that pressure? No, we do not; but in the struggle not to cede to the pressure, it is crucial to understand the class character of the state as a form of social relations and to develop our own distinctive,
asymmetrical forms: forms that move against-and-beyond the fetishisation characteristic of capitalist forms.\textsuperscript{9}

Do we now know how to make the revolution? No, we do not; and only a charlatan would claim that we do. To criticise the book for wanting to confront our lack of certainty\textsuperscript{10} is nonsensical.

As Michael Löwy puts it, ‘We all are seeking our way, no one can say he has found the true and only strategy.’ The book is intended to be part of that seeking. If the book has had an impact, it is because it is part of a more general searching for a way forward, part of a more general attempt to reinvent revolution.\textsuperscript{11}

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Notes


2. As Mathers and Taylor point out in their comment.

3. This argument is developed in my paper ‘The state and everyday struggle’ (first published in Spanish in 1980; first published in English in Clarke, 1991, together with Simon’s criticism of the article for being ‘populist’).

4. The extreme implications of Marx’s theory seem to disturb Alex Callinicos who, in an earlier review of the book, comments that ‘Holloway espouses an extreme form of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism’ (Callinicos, 2003).

5. Pablo Ghigliani comments disparagingly: ‘Thus, he limits himself to discovering the verbs hidden behind the nouns that constitute the language of domination.’ He is wrong to disparage: if the book helps at all to dissolve nouns into verbs, it will have fulfilled all my dreams.

6. Mabel Thwaites Rey and Andrew Mathers and Graham Taylor interpret the book in this sense, but this was certainly never my intention.

7. A critique of fetishism necessarily includes a critique of representative democracy and a drive towards direct democracy; this is a distinction that Michael Löwy seems reluctant to make. See my reply to him in Holloway, 2004.

8. For an important discussion of emerging forms of struggle, see Zibechi, 2003.

9. That is surely the main point of the old state debate, whatever Mabel Thwaites Rey and Mathers and Taylor may think. More specifically, I see no incompatibility between the argument of the book and LEWRG (1979/1980), although I agree that there is a shift in emphasis.

10. As do Alex Callinicos and many others.

11. Authors’ assessment of the book has much to do with their assessment of the present situation. Pablo Ghigliani, Atilio Boron and (in a different way) Alberto Bonnet all see the book as a symptom of the decadence and fragmentation of current struggles. Néstor López and Luis Menéndez see it as part of an exciting upsurge of revolutionary struggles. Let us hope, for everyone’s sake, that López and Menéndez are right.
References


Other references are to articles contained within this Forum.