

Screams and spit

Twelve comments plus one more, to continue the debate with John Holloway

Thursday 26 January 2006, by [BENSAÏD Daniel](#) (Date first published: 2005).

1. *'Spit on history'*, John Holloway answers us. Why not? But on which history? For him apparently there is only one history, a one-way history, the history of oppression that even contaminates the struggle of the oppressed. As if history and memory were not themselves battlefields. As if a history of the oppressed - often an oral history (history of the exploited, women's history, gay history, the history of colonised peoples) - does not also exist, just as we can conceive of a theatre of the oppressed or a politics of the oppressed.

2. For Holloway history is *'the great excuse for not thinking'*. Does he mean that it is impossible to think historically? And then what do we mean by 'thinking'? - an old question that, always getting in the way.

3. Spit *'also on the concept of Stalinism'*, which absolves us of the 'need to blame ourselves' and constitutes a convenient 'fig-leaf, protecting our innocence'. No one today imagines that the revolution of the 1920s, luminous and immaculate, can be counterposed to the dark 1930s on which we can dump every sin. No one has emerged unscathed from the 'century of extremes'. Everyone needs to methodically examine his or her conscience, including us. But is this sufficient reason to erase the discontinuities that Michel Foucault was so fond of? To establish a strict genealogical continuity between the revolutionary event and the bureaucratic counter-revolution? To pronounce an evenly balanced verdict of 'guilty' on both victors and vanquished, both the executioners and their victims? This is not a moral question but rather a political one. It determines whether it is possible to 'continue' or 'begin anew'. The darkness of non-history, in which all cats are grey (without for all that catching the tiniest mouse) is the preferred landscape for neoliberals and repentant Stalinists to hold their reunions, hurriedly wiping out the traces of their past without thinking about this past that makes it so hard for them to pass.

4. *'Spit on history because there is nothing so reactionary as the cult of the past.'* So be it. But who is talking about a cult? Does tradition weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living? Definitely. But what tradition? Where does this singular tradition come from, in the singular, in which so many contrary traditions vanish away? Walter Benjamin by contrast, whom Holloway cites so eagerly (appositely or not), demands that we rescue tradition from the conformism that always threatens it. This distinction is essential.

5. *'Break history. Du passé faisons table rase.'* The song rings out proudly. But the politics of the blank page (which Chairman Mao was so fond of) and the blank slate evokes some rather disquieting precedents. Its most consistent advocate was none other than a certain Pol Pot. Gilles Deleuze speaks more wisely when he says, 'We always begin in the middle.' ("we always restart from the middle") ?

6. *'Spit on history'*? Nietzsche himself, certainly the most virulent critic of historical reason and the myth of progress, was subtler. He did admittedly recommend learning to forget in order to be able to

act. He took exception to any history that would be 'a kind of conclusion to living and a final reckoning for humanity'. But while he implacably denounced 'monumental history', 'antiquarian history', 'excess of historical culture' and the 'supersaturation of an age in history', and history as such as 'a disguised theology', he maintained nonetheless that 'living requires the services of history': 'To be sure, we need history. But we need it in a manner different from the way in which the spoilt idler in the garden of knowledge uses it ... for life and action, not for a comfortable turning away from life and action....' Nietzsche thus defended the necessity of a 'critical history'. At least he claimed to counter 'the effects of history' not with a politics of emancipation but rather with an aesthetic: the 'powers of art', or the "'super-historical" ... powers which divert the gaze from what is developing back ... to art and religion'. Myth against history?

7. *'We live in a world of Monsters of our own creation'*. While commodities, money, capital and the state are fetishes, they are not 'mere illusions, they are real illusions'. Exactly. What follows from this, in practical terms? That abolishing these illusions requires abolishing the social relations that make them necessary and fabricate them? Or, as Holloway suggests, that we must be content with a fetish strike: 'Capital exists because we create it.... If we do not create it tomorrow, it will cease to exist'? In the aftermath of 1968 there were Maoists who claimed that 'driving out the cop' in our minds would be enough to get rid of the real cops too. Yet the real cops are still with us (more than ever), and the tyranny of the ego is still secure even in the best regulated minds. So would refusing to create capital suffice to lift its spells? Magical behaviour (conjuring away in our imaginations an imaginary despot) would only bring about a liberation just as imaginary. Abolishing the conditions of fetishism in reality means overthrowing the despotism of the market and the power of private property and breaking the state that ensures the conditions of social reproduction.

8. No doubt this is all an old story. But where are the new stories? The new must always be made (at least in part) with the bricks of the old. Holloway defines the revolution as 'the breaking of tradition, the discarding of history..., the smashing of the clock and the concentration of time into a moment of unbearable intensity.' Here he is recycling the imagery that Benjamin used in describing the rebels in 1830 who fired on the faces of public clocks. The symbolic destruction of the image of time still confuses the fetish of temporality with the social relationship on which it rests: the 'wretched' measurement of abstract labour time.

9. Holloway blots out with his spit the criticisms that Atilio Boron, Alex Callinicos, Guillermo Almeyra and I have made of his work. He reproaches us with envisaging history as 'something unproblematic', instead of opening it up to theoretical questions. This is a gratuitous accusation, backed up neither with arguments nor with serious evidence. All of us have on the contrary devoted much of our work to interrogating, revising, deconstructing and reconstructing our historical worldview. History is like power; you cannot ignore it. You can refuse to take power, but then it will take you. You can throw history out the door, but it will kick over the traces and come back in through the window.

10. There is *'something fundamentally wrong with the power-centred concept of revolution'*. But what? Foucault passed this way a long time ago. More than 25 years ago I wrote a book entitled *La Révolution et le Pouvoir* ('The Revolution and Power'), around the idea that the state can be broken but the 'relations of power' must still be undone (or deconstructed). This is not a new issue. It reached us by way of libertarian traditions and May '68, among other ways. Why, if not out of ignorance, does Holloway make a show of radically innovating (still making a clean sweep) instead of situating himself in discussions that have - a (long) history!

11. *'The accumulation of struggle is an incremental view of revolution'*, says Holloway. It is a positive movement, whereas the anti-capitalist movement 'must be a negative movement'. Criticising illusions of progress, the stockbroking spirit, Penelope's weaving their electoral skeins (stitch by

stitch, link by link), interest piled on interest, and the ineluctable march of history as it triumphs over regrettable skids, detours and delays - all this criticism is itself an old tradition (represented in France by Georges Sorel and Charles Péguy, who had so much influence on Benjamin). But just the same, is the absolute interruption of a scream without a past or a sequel enough to outweigh the continuities of historical time? Benjamin takes exception to the homogenous, empty time of the mechanics of progress, and with it to the notion of an evanescent present, a simple, evanescent hyphen, absolutely determined by the past and irresistibly aspiring to a predestined future. In Benjamin's work by contrast the present becomes the central category of a strategic temporality: each present is thus invested with a feeble messianic power of reshuffling the cards of past and future, giving the vanquished of yesterday and forever their chance, and rescuing tradition from conformism. Yet for all that this present is not detached from historical time. As in Blanqui's work it maintains relations with past events, not relations of causality, but rather relations of astral attraction and constellation. It is in this sense that, to use Benjamin's definitive formulation, from now on politics trumps history.

12. *'Using History as a pretext'*, Holloway says, we want to 'pour new struggles into old methods': 'Let the new forms of struggle flourish.' Just because we are constantly welcoming a portion of newness, history (!) exists rather than some divine or mercantile eternity. But the historical dialectic of old and new is subtler than any binary or Manichean opposition between old and new, including methodologically. Yes, let the new flourish; do not give in to routine and habit; stay open to surprise and astonishment. This is all useful advice. But how, by what standard, can we evaluate the new if we lose all memory of the old? Novelty, like antiquity, is always a relative notion.

Screaming and spitting do not amount to thinking.
Still less to doing politics.