

# **Review of change the world without taking power from John Holloway**

Friday 26 May 2006, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: 2002).

**John Holloway, Change the world without taking power. The meaning of revolution today, London, Pluto Press, 2002**

This is a remarkable essay, thought-provocative and truly radical - in the original sense of the word, « going to the roots of the problems ». 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 ».

One of the best section of the book is the first one, « The Scream ». This few pages are among the most powerful and moving in revolutionary thought that I have read in the last years. His basic assumption is that « we need no promise of a happy-ending to justify our rejection of a world we feel to be wrong ». Faced with the mutilation of lives by capitalism, « there arises a scream of sadness, a scream of horror, a scream of anger, a scream of refusal : NO. » Our protest against the established order does not depend for its validity on any particular outcome. However, « the scream clings to the possibility of an opening, refuses to accept the closure of the possibility of radical otherness ».

The key philosophical chapters of the book deal with Fetishism and Fetishisation. Creatively drawing on Marx, Lukacs and Adorno, Holloway defines fetishism as the separation of doing from done and the breaking of the collective flow of doing. He insists that fetishism is not a state that permeates the whole of society, but a process, the antagonistic movement of fetishisation against anti-fetishisation. Critical theory should then be understood as part of the movement of anti-fetishisation, part of the struggle to defend, restore and create the collective flow of doing.

This is a very insightful viewpoint, but J.H. seems to identify all form 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 Lukacs did not do, inspite 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. of those theories which attempt to enlist certainty to the side of socialism and claim to explain and predict historical change according to « scientific laws » : « Our struggle is inherently and profoundly uncertain. This is so because certainty is conceivable only on the basis of the reification of social relations. It is possible to speak of the 'laws of motion' of society only to the extent that social relations take the form of relations between things. (...) Revolutionary change cannot possibly be conceived as following a path of certainty, because certainty is the very negation of revolutionary change. Our struggle is a struggle against reification and therefore against certainty ». This section is one of the most important of the book, and a significant contribution for 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 her

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 » in socialist politics.

Now I come to the main bone of contention, which gives the title of the book : « changing the world without taking power ». Holloway suggests at first that all attempts at revolutionary change so far failed because they were based on the paradigm of change through winning state power. However, as he acknowledges on footnote 8 from page 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 three theoretical arguments :

The first one is that the existing state is part of the capitalist social relations. However, as he himself writes, revolutionary Marxism is aware of such connections : its aim is not to seize the existing state, but to smash it and create a new one (p. 15). The second argument is that the state as such, whatever its social content, is a fetishised form. This is the classical Anarchist argument, which Marx, to a certain extent, shared, particularly in his writings on the Paris Commune, where one can find the suggestion of a non-state form of political power. But here comes his third argument, the distinction, introduced on 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 J.H. should promote the first, and uproot the second. I must confess that I'm 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 is dismissed as a « state-defined process of electorally influenced decision making » (p. 97). I have to disagree. I believe that democracy should be a central aspect in all process of social and political decision making, and particularly in a revolutionary process - an argument remarkably 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 an 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 a few weeks, the Zapatistas decided to stop shooting and to negotiate a truce. Who decided ? The Zapatista villages discussed, and a majority - perhaps there was even a general consensus - decided that armed fighting should cease. The minority - if there was one, I don't know - must accept this decision, or split from the Zapatista movement. The majority had power over the minority. The villages then gave order to the commanders of the EZLN to stop fire. They had power over the commanders. And finally, the commanders themselves, according to the logic of *mandar obedeciendo* (« command while obeying »), obeyed the orders of the villages, and instructed the Zapatista fighters to stop shooting : they had power over them. I don't pretend 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 on the issue of power, antipower and counterpower 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 from 1917.

In one of the few passages where 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). One can show that in each one of these examples you have forms of democratic power requiring some form of power-over. I have already discussed the practice of the Zapatistas' village councils. What about their propositions for Mexico? Holloway's book is, to a certain extent, a brilliant comment on the well-known Zapatista principle of revolutionary action: « We don't want to seize power! ». But this assertion cannot be understood if it is not connected to another famous slogan of the EZLN: « Everything for all, nothing for us! ». And if one relates both statements to the fight for democracy in Mexico, which stands high in all Zapatista pronouncements, one has the following argument: « we, the Zapatista Army, don't want to seize power in our hands; we want power to all the people, i.e. a real democracy ».

In the Paris Commune one has a new form of power who wasn't any more a state, in the usual sense; but still it was a power, democratically elected by the people of Paris - a combination of direct and representative democracy - and it had power over the population, by 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 » (I'm quoting an essay from Pannekoek from 1938).

What I feel is also lacking in J.H.'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 « No », however barbaric, can be a « driving force » as J.H. suggests on page 205: I don't think that suicide, going mad, terrorism and all sorts of anti-human responses to the system can be « starting points » for emancipation. Just to give the obvious example: Ben Laden is not a starting point, it is a blind alley.

I like the conclusion of the book - without an end. We all are searching 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...

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## **P.S.**

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