

Response to John Holloway

Change the World by Transforming Power - Including State Power!

Tuesday 9 August 2005, by [WAINWRIGHT Hilary](#) (Date first published: 16 October 2004).

Written version of Wainwrigth's speech in the debate on 'Strategies for Social Transformation', at the European Social Forum, October 16, 2004. The other speakers were John Holloway, Fausto Bertinotti and Phil Hearse. Their contributions are also available on our website, except the one of Bertinotti (not received).

I've been puzzling over John Holloway's book. I say puzzling because on the one hand, there is a lot I agreed with in his critique of the traditional left - Leninist and social democratic - in particular their fixation with seizing or taking state power. I agreed too with his emphasis on recognising our own creative power: both our power of refusal and our power of transformation; and his focus on the ways that we can change society ourselves through collective and co-operative action rather than look to the state or the party to achieve change on our behalf.

But when Holloway addressed the question of how to transform, break up, in any way challenge the repressive exploitative power we are up against, in other words, when he considered the transition from dispersed self-organised initiatives to a society free of power relations of domination and exploitation, the book was very disappointing. Even its language became completely opaque, impossible to pin down, lacking any practical, historical meaning. Holloway talks about 'dissolving' the existing power structures, but without hinting at how; or indicating what the connection might be between the development of autonomous sources of democratic power and the break-up, transformation or even 'dissolution' of oppressive relations of power. It's as if all we can do is borrow ray guns from the cast of Star Trek, point them at the institutions of overbearing power and 'kerpow' these relations of power will dissolve before our eyes.

The problem with Holloway's approach is that it proposes an (old) dichotomy between on the one hand changing the world through autonomous self-organised sources of power or, on the other, seizing/taking state power. He thus ignores, almost as if they had never happened, the last thirty years or so of experiment with a variety of innovative connections and combinations between autonomous self-organised power and initiatives to transform, as well as confront, the state, especially the local state, and political parties. These include initiatives and struggles that John and others wrote about in the book 'In and Against the State'.

To illustrate the true complexities of the relationship between autonomous transformative power and struggles around state and party institutions I want to draw on the experiences of socialist feminism in the UK in the 1970s. This was a political movement that suffered a serious defeat, along with the labour movements to which it was closely allied, by the onslaught of Thatcherism. But the defeat of a movement does not make its ideas and aspirations wrong or lacking in important lessons for the future. This experience was particularly rich for our debate about power because the women's movement of those years placed strong emphasis on bringing about as much change as possible in

everyday life, directly and if possible immediately. But at the same time, socialist feminists also found that because of women's multiple dependency on the welfare institutions of the state, we had to search out new effective ways of dealing with political power building on our own, non-state forms of public power.

On the one hand, we rejected the deferred political gratification offered to women by both social democratic parties: 'help us get into government and then ...' and parties of the Leninist left: 'just wait until after the revolution...'. We needed change now and together we began to create and discover diverse kinds of power, including in ourselves, to create change in our daily lives. Through 'consciousness raising groups', for example, we developed the confidence and insight to change, more or less successfully, our relations with men and with each other - and in the process change ourselves. We took on the cultural subordination and 'objectification' of women in advertising, in humiliating rituals like 'Miss World' and in film, theatre, literature and music, partly through criticism and challenge, partly through creating our own cultural products. We organised ourselves and won wider support to create new social institutions to meet needs not previously recognised as the responsibility of public institutions: women's centres for the victims of domestic violence; rape crisis centres; nurseries run by the community, special health care for women and so on. We formed alliances with radical grassroots trade union organisations, in the workplace and in the locality, to take action for equal pay and improved conditions. In all these ways, we were creating the transformative power that Holloway advocates. We were changing society without taking power.

At the same time, we began to come up against the limits of our autonomous power, even the limits of the power of alliances with the radical trade union movement of the time. The nurseries, women's centres, rape crisis centres etc. that we created needed regular funding; one-off grants from private foundations were not enough. It wasn't enough to keep on taking action for equal pay in individual factories; we knew we would always have to fight for it but we wanted to have the support of comprehensive legislative action. And anyway, we believed that women, like all citizens, have a right to exert control over the allocation of public resources and the legislative process. We had little faith in existing parliamentary political institutions - which is why we took the first initiatives to bring about change ourselves - but having built our own autonomous sources of power, defined our needs and demands and built considerable support amongst the mass of women, we felt we could fight for what we needed from our elected representatives as equals not supplicants.

Our sisters, the suffragettes, had fought for the vote. In many ways, the democratic power of the vote - that is, the power of the vote as an instrument of popular control and political equality - subsequently proved insufficient. One of the reasons the franchise became an inadequate instrument of democracy was because anti-democratic sources of power both within the state, in the institutions of parliamentary parties, and in the private market, constantly and successfully sought to control and pressure any elected government with a radical mandate, pulling elected politicians and 'public servants' away from the people they were meant to represent and serve. As an organised movement with a power that came from already having brought about improvements in women's lives, we believed we had a basis for countering these pressures and requiring at least parts of the state and political parties to respond to the needs of the people and to support and consolidate the changes that we had put in motion.

Holloway vividly describes the way in which the state is an alien institution, separate from us, over and above us. He asserts that this is inscribed in the nature of the state. But in the 1970s and early 80s, certainly in several cities in the UK, and I think also in some other European countries, we managed briefly to open parts of the municipal state to the demands and initiatives of local women's organisations and also to achieve some transformation of local state institutions themselves. This was not an achievement of the women's movement alone. These precarious changes in state and party institutions would have been impossible without an unprecedented shift in the balance of

power as a result of industrially militant and socially radical extra-parliamentary struggle.

I draw two points from this experience. The first is a logical extension of one of Holloway's correct criticisms of the traditional left, yet which paradoxically boomerangs back on his own position. He accuses the traditional left of reifying the state: treating it like a thing, separate from the rest of society. Correctly, he insists that the state is 'embedded' in capitalist social relations. For him this points to the importance of action for change within those social relations. Fine. But if the social relations of capitalist society are relations of struggle, conflict and possible transformation, and the state is embedded in them, then could not the social relations of the state in all their varied and complex forms also be relations of struggle, conflict and transformation? Why should the struggle stop at the walls of the state, particularly in countries where previous movements have made - albeit precariously - democratic and redistributive gains? And where state workers are members of radical trade unions and wider social movements and where a minority of elected politicians see their allegiance as first and foremost to democratic social movements rather than the sanctity of the existing state? I'm not implying this is a necessary, automatic consequence of the state embeddedness. The reactionary institutions of state might, depending on the particular historical circumstances, have created particularly strong anti-democratic defences, enabling these institutions to withstand and repress democratic pressures. But if they have that is a matter of historical circumstance which can change. Depending on the historical success of democratic struggles, the relation of state, government and party institutions to the conflict in the wider capitalist society will vary, as will the possibilities of change. To treat the alienation of the state from society as some kind of universal fact, as Holloway treats it, means treating the state as necessarily above the struggles going on in the social relations of which it is part. In this way, Holloway ends up making the error he vehemently attacks in the traditional left: in effect treating the state as an ahistorical, thing-like phenomenon above the wider society.

A revealing present day illustration of the way in which the struggles within capitalist society overflow into the institutions of state, government and party is resistance to privatisation. Such resistance provides many examples of state workers, public service users and elected politicians campaigning together to defend state institutions while transforming them and making them more accountable and responsive to the people. Holloway's political intellectual framework cannot understand this resistance. It is based on denying the possibility of effective struggle within the state, in effect denying the political achievements (mainly of redistribution, however distorted) brought about by labour and social democratic (in Italy and France communist) movements after the Second World War. Yet the struggle to resist the marketisation of public, common goods and spaces will be a central issue of social justice in the first decade of the 21st century and it will happen within, as well as against, state institutions.

If, as I am suggesting, the pull of the state away from the people is not inscribed in the state's character but is historically produced and subject to historical transformation, then why, when parties of the left are in office in liberal democracies, do state and party institutions continue to lord it over the people, frequently ignoring and increasingly attacking their interests? I am looking here for further explanation than simply referring to the power of corporate capital and the market; it remains to be explained why left parties have almost invariably given in to these pressures, and often repressed those who try to stand up for the party's original radical commitments. Does the brief exception of the 70s in the UK, when - especially at a local level - social and industrial struggles briefly fused to create a combined pressure on the left to adopt a different relation to the state, shed light on this question?

I believe the answer is partly to be found in the assumptions and strategies of the traditional left that Holloway criticises. He falls short, however, of exploring how these political mentalities, built into or driving political institutions, can themselves be causal mechanisms. An examination of these 'top-

down' political mentalities could explain, however, how state institutions retain their alienating character even when formally under the control of the left. I'm thinking here of the practical implications of how the traditional parties of the left (particularly the social democratic or 'communist-turned-social democratic' left) have viewed social change and the role of political parties/organisation in it. The presumption has been that the state apparatus of capitalist society provides an adequate instrument of social - even socialist - change when captured by a party or parties of the left. This in turn has meant that party organisation assumed that party members and supporters, including mass organisations such as the trade unions, were means to get into office, sources of funds and votes. This view of party organisation focused almost exclusively on gathering the funds and the votes to win elections in order to carry out policies drawn up by the party leadership and broadly agreed with the membership. Decision-making over important issues - there's plenty of autonomy on the margins - is centralised, as is the allocation of funds. Activity that leads to division or sustained debate or 'diversion' of resources is discouraged or decisively blocked. Any history of the left in power - the Labour Party, the German SDP, now even the ANC - shows these parties applying this model of party organisation with differing degrees of success. It is a template from which political parties - even the Greens, trying to innovate - find it hard to depart.

The significance of this model lies in an absence or missed strategic opportunity. The members and supporters of mass social democratic parties are, or were, the greater proportion of the workers and citizens on whom the capitalist economy and state depends. They are knowledgeable, skilled people whose values of social justice lie latent or only half exercised in their daily lives at work and in the community. Potentially they are a huge and creative force for change. But for this potential to be realised, their creativity, knowledge and potential power has to become focused consciously on creating the social relations of a new society rather than the daily process of seeking to survive in the existing society - and unconsciously reproducing it. As Holloway and I would both argue, a variety of struggles and initiatives are constantly trying to create these new relations. The question that follows from my critique of Holloway is: what kinds of political organisation - maybe leave aside the term 'party' for the time being - could best strengthen the ability of these movements and struggles to influence the decisions and very nature of government, at every level?

First, the lesson from the UK is that there are pitfalls in simply becoming part of and trying to change a social democratic party. When the women's and labour movements of the 70s in the UK were very strong, there was an automatic shaking up of the party - a brief moment even when the traditional centre lost control - but these established structures are more resilient and resourced than the young institutions of the women's movement and the radical, grassroots trade union movement, and in the end battling within the Labour party drew feminists away from strengthening their own organisations and alliances.

The existence of an independent left party, declaring itself to be a 'voice of the movements' is not an answer either. The experience of the German Greens and the Dutch Green Left are evidence of that. Their roots in the movements though strong in terms of good will, and good intentions, were materially and politically too weak to resist the pressures of incorporation into the state.

I would argue that the key relationships shaping a political organisation are: the organisation's relationship to the labour organisations, and radical movements, and to 'unorganised' citizens and would-be voters; the organisation's relationship to governmental office; and the role of the organisation in how change is brought about. In most political parties and organisations of the left, all these relationships need to be radically transformed.

Currently, left political organisations centralise political wisdom - policy, strategy, even tactics. They then reach out to 'intervene in' the movements and provide leadership. Or they recruit voters and members to join their organisation because it is the instrument of political change. My argument,

resting on an understanding of the creative, knowing skilled character of the organisation or party's supporters and members, is that the organisation has to have a relationship with activists who associate with it - that is, more one of co-operation between equals, less one of leader and led; more one of co-operation between people with different sources of knowledge and power but a common goal, less one of teacher and taught - a relationship that is more reciprocal.

All sorts of psychological mechanisms reinforce the centralising, 'leaderising', and differentiating or sectarian tendencies of a political organisation or party. There is the common desire to recreate a family, a source of security in a harsh uncertain world. We all need support but must beware of unconsciously reproducing our first and often fundamental source of security. There are many other more creative, expansive ways of creating solidarity and support. Where they are a barrier to an open, flexible and egalitarian relationship with other people, we must be prepared to break from unconscious legacies of our past. Another such legacy is an unconscious attraction to modes of organisation that put some of us in a superior or special position, make us 'the leadership', the people with superior knowledge. I'm not urging abandonment of working together to promote common ideas, but a transformative notion of power will be based on a recognition of an immense diversity of transformative action, all of which will make its own discoveries about the dynamic of change. Hence we need new participatory means of aggregating the insights which come from struggle and reflecting on the experiences of struggle, rather than presumptions of leadership. The kind of participatory experiments now going on in the preparations for the Fifth Social Forum are very important not only for the Forum, but also for the invention of new radical forms of political organisation.

Clearly we are talking about the reinvention of political organisations, whether we call them parties or not - sometimes they will be coalitions of organisations for specific purposes, including elections. A fundamental issue in this reinvention, which stems from the rejection of an exclusively statist notion of or radical change, is the importance of doing everything we can in the present to create the kind of society we want in the future. In the 1970s we called it 'pre-figurative politics'. At its most practical, it meant proper childcare at left conferences, 50% women on the platforms, an end to male chauvanism in the daily life of the left and so on. Today's 'pre-figurative politics' can be seen in the movements and campaigns which challenge the corporate domination of food production; urge waste recycling; scrutinise products ethically and environmentally; experiment with deeper forms of democracy. It is seen where techno-activists demonstrate the ethical and political choices implicit in every new development in information and communication technology. We need forms of political organisation which can support and understand these practical alternatives and help bring about the wider political conditions in which these alternatives can thrive. Again this means political parties and organisations giving up on their monopoly over change and instead working out their role in spreading these social changes from below, including into the state itself. Examples of this range from the ambitious experiments in participatory democracy in Brazil and Italy through the US towns which have banned corporate chains, to the municipal councils which insist their suppliers pay good wages and provide high quality employment, who are developing recycling and who purchase only organic and preferably co-operative produced food for their schools and canteens, and so on.

In this way the political organisation, whatever its form, is 'one actor amongst many'; as Fausto Bertinotti would argue, essential and particular but not superior. As the President of the new Party of the European Left and the General Secretary of Rifondazione at the centre of a Herculean process of political reinvention, he has a rich experience from which to draw.

The struggle over the state institutions - for political representation, for deeper more participatory forms of public decision-making, for democratic forms of administration and so on - is one dimension of struggle amongst many - again, essential and particular but not superior or all-encompassing. We would not abandon the struggle over control and ownership in the factory because of the repressive,

exploitative character of management and the alienated character of labour, so why should we abandon related struggles within, as well as against, the state? To abandon the former would be to negate the efforts of previous generations of fighters for social justice. To abandon the struggle over the state and political institutions would be to treat past struggles for democracy with contempt. But this doesn't mean we need follow the organisational routines which we have inherited; on the contrary, the main challenge is to invent and to innovate without losing our common sense of direction and purpose.

P.S.

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