

# Just an answer to John Holloway

Sunday 18 February 2007, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: October 2003).

John's paper is, as the title says, much more than an answer to my critical comments. [1] I can agree with much that he has to say on capitalism, on "our" power and "theirs", and on democracy. By the way, I'm pleased that my remarks encouraged him to clarify his views on democracy, a concept that was somehow missing in his book. I like his definition of "our democracy" as the struggle to create a self-determining society, a society, in other words, in which capital no longer exists; I also like the project of a council democracy that is necessarily anti-capitalist, revolutionary, communist - in the original meaning of the word.

I can also agree with most of his critical remarks on the really existing "representative democracy", a political system that is very little "representative" and even less democratic. I think John would agree with me that even this degraded form of "democracy" is preferable to dictatorship - as well known to all those who fought against fascism in Europe or against the military Juntas in Latin America (not to speak of the bureaucratic regimes of the Stalinist model).

So where are the disagreements ? John Holloway does not only criticize the existing forms of "representative democracy" - which are, as he emphasizes, in a deep crisis and increasingly distrusted by the population - but **the principle itself of representation**. Let us forget for a moment our beloved thinkers - Benjamin, Bloch, the young Lukacs, Adorno - and have a look just at the great revolutionary events mentioned by John as examples of **our democracy**, council democracy : the Paris Commune, the soviets of 1905 and 1917, the councils in the Spanish Civil War, the village councils of the zapatistas. As far as I can see, in all these events we have - under specific forms in each case - **an association of direct and representative democracy**, combining local general assemblies with the election of (revocable) delegates. This is inevitable if we want "our democracy" to have power-to-do not only in one factory, one popular neighbourhood, one village, but on a whole region, a country, a continent.

As I had already mentioned in my review of John's book, the Paris Commune was a body composed of elected counsellors - chosen by universal suffrage in each Parisian neighbourhood (*arrondissement*); these representatives could be revoked by their voters. The Petersburg Soviet from 1905 (or 1917) was composed of delegates elected in each factory. Similar forms appeared in Spain - where the delegates elected to the Central Committee of the Milicias ruled Barcelona during the first months after the uprising of July 1936 - and in Chiapas, more recently, when the indigenous communities elected an Insurgent Clandestine Revolutionary Committee, which is the legitimate leadership of the indigenous zapatista movement. In each case, representatives were elected to speak and act in the name of local assemblies. I'm not saying this is without its problems, but one thing is to try to solve the difficulties, by methods of democratic control over the elected representatives, and by a permanent struggle against bureaucratization, and a quite different is to try to **do away with any form of representation** - as Holloway seems to suggest. This in my opinion is no solution, but a blind alley.

Direct democracy through local assemblies is the best way of self-rule at the level of a factory, of an university, a rural community or an urban *barrio*. But as soon as the movement goes beyond the local level, as soon as it becomes regional or national, forms of representation are necessary and inevitable. The challenge therefore is not to plead, in abstract, against representation as such, which

can only disrupt the movement, but to find how to combine, in new and inventive ways, direct and representative democracy.

This leads us to the question of the **state**. I agree with John that the state is part of the network of capitalist domination, and cannot become an instrument for the true emancipation of the oppressed. The Paris Commune of 1871, according to Marx, was not a state anymore, but the beginning of a new form of political organisation, "the political form finally discovered that would permit to accomplish the economic emancipation of labour". In order to establish this new power, this "power from below", one cannot remain at the "horizontal" level of local assemblies, but has to build some sort of representative body, network or federation, based on direct democracy - or "council democracy" - that is able to deal with political and economical issues at the regional and national level.

And what about the "really existing state", the present degraded form of so-called "representative democracy" ? According to John, revolutionaries do not necessarily avoid all contact with representative democracy : there are circumstances in which it makes sense to vote in elections. I think that there are many such circumstances... Particularly in countries like Argentina, who went through many years of a murderous military dictatorship, and where people are keen to defend their democratic rights, whatever their limitations. Sure, they were fed up with their corrupt politicians and developed a remarkable popular insurrection at the end of 2001, under the slogan "¡Que se vayan todos!" "Let them all go away!" However, very few - less than in previous elections - followed the call of some sections of the left to abstain from the elections in 2003; they went massively to vote, and since there was no united alternative candidature of the left - unlike Bolivia, where the social movements and the socialist left unified around the radical peasant leader Evo Morales, and almost won the elections - they voted for another *peronista* leader.

To conclude : even the corrupted "representative democracy" we have at present is better than no democracy at all. But the aim of our struggle is an altogether different form of democracy, a revolutionary "council democracy" from below, combining direct and representative forms, and a new form of political power, leading to the suppression of the capitalist system.

In this way we can be faithful to revolutionary poetry and hope for a world where, as Baudelaire said, action and dream won't be opposed anymore.

## Note

1. See on ESSF website, John Holloway, [Power and Democracy: More than a Reply to Michael Löwy](#)