

A Critical Review of John Holloway's Book

# To change the World Without Taking Power?

Sunday 27 November 2005, by [HEARSE Phil](#) (Date first published: 2003).

**On John Holloway's boook: "Change the World Without Taking Power, The Meaning of Revolution Today", Pluto Press 2002 (pbk).**

## Contents

- [The State: 'Assassin of Hope'](#)
- [The reproduction of capitalist](#)
- [Marxism, science, consciousness](#)
- [Strategic conclusions: a \(...\)](#)

Discussing the ideas in this book is useful, not because John Holloway has legions of devoted followers, but because many of the ideas he advances about fundamental social change are widespread in the global justice movement and anti-war movement internationally.

The idea of refusing to take power was popularised recently by Subcommandante Marcos, leader of the Zapatistas. Like much of what the Subcommandante says, this was very ambiguous, because in any case the EZLN, representing indigenous people in a small corner of Mexico, cannot possibly take power - at least on its own (1). However, the basic idea of revolutionising social relations without conquering power has been around a long time.

Although Holloway has some critical things to say about Tronti and Antonio Negri, intellectual parents of the Italian autonomia currents, his main arguments come directly from them: don't confront the power of the bosses in the world of work, withdraw from it. Create autonomous spaces - autonomous from the bosses, autonomous from the capitalist state. Of course this means struggle, but not the elaborate apparatuses of political parties or taking state power.

Some of the things that Holloway says in the course of his argument are very widespread today's radical movements; they go to the heart of revolutionary strategy, and explicitly Holloway's main polemical target is revolutionary marxism.

Reviewing a book like this means lengthy quotes so readers can judge the argument for themselves: but to anticipate, key Holloway arguments are:

- 1) Reformism and revolutionary marxism both have as their strategic objective capturing state or governmental power; but this is a trap, since the state is inevitably an authoritarian structure. (Bog standard anarchism, that one).
- 2) The state is not the locus of power; capitalist social relations are where power lies. Orthodox Marxists don't see that the state is firmly embedded in capitalist social relations and that merely capturing it changes little, since authoritarian social relations remain in place.
- 3) Capitalist social relations can only be changed by alternative social practices that are generated

by the oppressed themselves, in the course of resistance and struggle.

4) The theoretical basis of this argument is the category of (commodity) fetishism and its reproduction. Social relations are not a structure or a 'thing', but a relationship which is daily reproduced in the process of 'fetishisation'. But this reproduction is not automatic and can be disrupted by alternative social practices of resistance.

5) The claim by Engels and others that Marxism is a 'science' automatically generates an authoritarian practice; the oppressed are divided into those who 'know' (the vanguard, the party) and those who have false consciousness (the masses). A manipulative and substitutionist practice automatically results from this idea. Even Lukacs and Gramsci couldn't break out of this false problematic.

6) There are no guarantees of a happy ending; all that is possible is negative critique and resistance, and we shall see the outcome.

### **The State: 'Assassin of Hope'**

"What can we do to put an end to all the misery and exploitation?...There is an answer ready at hand. Do it through the state. Join a political party, help it to win governmental power, change the country in that way. Or, if you are more impatient, more angry, more doubtful about what can be achieved through parliamentary means, join a revolutionary organisation, help conquer state power by violent or non-violent means, and then use the revolutionary state to change society.

*"Change the world through the state: this is the paradigm that has dominated revolutionary thought for more than a century. The debate between Rosa Luxemburg and Eduard Bernstein a hundred years ago on 'reform or revolution' established the terms which were to dominate thinking about revolution for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century...The intensity of the disagreements concealed a basic point of agreement: both approaches focus on the state as the vantage point from society can be changed..."* (2)

But this has been a trap, because:

*"If the state paradigm was the vehicle of hope for much of the century, it became more and more an assassin of hope as the century progressed....For over a hundred years the revolutionary enthusiasm of young people has been channeled into building the party or into learning to shoot guns; for over a hundred years the dreams of those who wanted a world fit for humanity have been bureaucratised and militarised, all for the winning of state power by a government that could then be accused of 'betraying' the movement that put it there....Rather than look to so many betrayals as an explanation, perhaps we need to look at the very notion that society can be changed through winning state power." (3)*

What theoretical error lies behind this trap?

*" [Revolutionary movements inspired by Marxism] have often had an instrumental view of the capitalist nature of the state. They have typically seen the state as being the instrument of the capitalist class. The notion of an 'instrument' implies the relation between the state and the capitalist class is an external one; like a hammer the state is wielded by the capitalist class in its own interests, while after the revolution it will be wielded by the working class in their interests. Such a view reproduces, unconsciously perhaps, the isolation or autonomisation of the state from its social environment, the critique of which is the starting point of revolutionary politics...this view fetishises*

*the state: it abstracts from the web of power relations in which it is embedded...The mistake of the Marxist revolutionary movement has been, not to deny the capitalist nature of the state, but to misunderstand the degree of integration of the state into the networks of capitalist social relations."* (4)

This leads to disastrous consequences for the movement:

*"What was something initially negative (the rejection of capitalism) is converted into something positive (institution building, power-building). The induction into the conquest of power inevitably becomes an induction into power itself. The initiates learn the language, logic and calculations of power; they learn to wield the categories of a social science which has been entirely shaped by its obsession with power."* (5)

This far from exhausts Holloway's line of reasoning about the state, and we go into subsidiary aspects below. However the critique of revolutionary marxism so far is very radical and raises many questions about the nature of capitalist society and how to change it. The following might be some initial points of reflection about Holloway's case.

First, Holloway knows, but does not emphasise, that revolutionary marxists do not fight to capture the capitalist state, but to smash it. For him, the state is the state, an unchanging category within which strictly limited sets of social relations can exist. His critique reads as if Lenin's *The State and Revolution* had never been written. But the marxist concept of revolution is not that the working class smashes the state and simply replaces it with a workers' state, through which social change can be effected. Our concept of the workers, socialist, 'state' is the democratic self-organisation of the masses, not the dictatorship of the party. Indeed we are not (or should not be) in favour of a monopoly by any one party.

Illogically, Holloway several times refers positively to the example of the Paris Commune. This of course was what inspired Lenin in *State and Revolution*. Lenin argues for the 'Commune State'; that was the basis of his thinking on the subject. In this conception, *social relations are changed, or begin to be changed, directly and immediately through the process of socialist revolution*, not just through the change in the nature of the state, but in the changing social relations which accompany this process. In advanced capitalist countries at least, it is impossible to imagine the scale of social mobilisation required to overwhelm the capitalist state, without at the same time - or in very short order - the popular masses seizing democratic control of the factories, offices and companies. Our concept of revolution is not simply 'capturing' the state and wielding it in the interests of the masses - that is the (old) social democratic idea; our alternative is the masses smashing the state in a huge social uprising and democratising power, governing through their own institutions of power.

Holloway's argument about the state being 'embedded' in capitalist social relations is correct as far as it goes, but is unidirectional. The state is not just buried in the web of capitalist social relations, it is essential for the functioning of capitalism. It is where much of the essential and strategic decision making is centered. It is the crucial defence mechanism against social relations being fundamentally changed.

Holloway's argument is basically that if you have any kind of state, you have oppression and capitalism. It's easy to see the illogicality of this argument. Let us change, for the sake of argument, the revolutionary marxist traditional phraseology. Let's abandon the idea of a workers' state, and say we want the *direct administration of social affairs by the democratically organised masses*. Naturally, they will have to elect recallable officials, have meetings in enterprises, offices and schools and vote on what to do. They may need some kind of national assembly and elected officials of that assembly to carry out executive functions. If all that is rejected, it is difficult to imagine how

the basic functioning of society could be decided and effected. Strangely (or perhaps wisely from his viewpoint) Holloway just doesn't discuss any element of post-revolutionary society, its decision-making or mechanisms of administration. Because if you do discuss that, you end up talking about something that sounds very like some kind of state.

This leads to a strange paradox in his argument which Holloway is blind to. For the sake of argument, let's say that the Zapatista base communities are a good model of changed social relations and self-government. Let's say we want to 'Zapatistise' the whole of Mexico. But in Holloway's schema you can't - because you would build, in this process, a state - a 'Zapatista state'. So you evacuate national (and international) terrains of struggle, concentrate on the local and the particular. Which can only lead to the capitalist class saying 'thank you very much'.

## **The reproduction of capitalist social relations**

Holloway invents his own phraseology to describe capitalist social relations. Capitalist power is 'power over' which confronts 'power to', and subjugates the 'social flow of doing'. This needn't bother us too much, because 'power over' turns out to be 'the power of the done', ie the power of accumulated capital against the creativity of living labour. 'Power to', sometimes described as 'anti-power', can confront 'power over'.

*"It is the movement of power-to, the struggle to emancipate human potential, that provides the perspective of breaking the circle of domination. It is only through the practice of emancipation, of power-to, that power-over can be overcome (my emphasis PH). Work, then, remains central to any discussion of revolution, but only if the starting point of that is not labour, not fetishised work, but rather work as doing, as the creativity or power-to that exists as, but also against-and-beyond labour."* (6)

This can take place within the following perspective:-

*"In the process of struggle-against, relations are formed which are not the mirror image of the relations of power against which the struggle is directed: relations of comradeship, of solidarity, of love, relations which prefigure the sort of society we are struggling for....[The struggle against capitalism] and the struggle for emancipation cannot be separated, even when those in struggle are not conscious of the link. The most liberating struggles, however, are surely those in which the two are consciously linked, as in those struggles which are consciously prefigurative, in which the struggle aims, in its forms, not to reproduce the structures and practices of that which is struggles against, but rather to create the sort of social relations which are desired."* (7)

In this context Holloway mentions for example factory occupations which are not just acts of resistance, but in which production is continued under workers control, for socially desirable ends. But Holloway contests what he sees as the narrowness of the left's view of what is 'political' and what is the exercise of 'anti-power':-

*"Anti-power is in the dignity of everyday existence. Anti-power is in the relations we form all the time, relations of love, friendship, comradeship, community, cooperation. Obviously such relations are traversed by power because of the nature of the society in which we live, yet the element of love, friendship, comradeship, lies in the constant struggle we wage against power, to establish those relations on the basis of mutual recognition, the mutual recognition of one another's dignity.....To think of opposition to capitalism only in terms of overt militancy is to see only the smoke rising from the volcano. Dignity (anti-power) exists wherever humans live. Oppression implies the opposite, the struggle to live as humans. In all that we live every day, illness, the educational system, sex, children, friendship, poverty, whatever, there is the struggle to do things with dignity, to do things*

right." (8).

A lot could be said about these ideas. Holloway is surely right in seeing a constant resentment against the effects of capitalism, a constant struggle against the effects of capitalist power in small as well as big things, and a constant struggle among large sections of the oppressed to create relations of mutual support with friends, family and workmates. But that's just one side of it. Lots of pettiness, meanness, jealousy, competition, violence, racism, sexism, criminality which targets other sections of the oppressed etc exists among the oppressed as well. The precise balance we can discuss. The issue, the strategic question, is *whether alternative (stable and permanent) social relations can be generated by alternative daily practices of resistance*. Holloway attempts to justify his view that they can by his adroit theoretical move on the question of fetishisation. According to him fetishised social relations are a process and not a structure:-

*"The understanding of fetishisation as a process is key to thinking about changing the world without taking power. If we abandon fetishisation-as-process, we abandon revolution as self-emancipation. The understanding of fetishism as hard fetishism can lead to understanding of revolution as changing the world on behalf of the oppressed, and this inevitably means a focus on taking power. Taking power is a political goal that makes sense of the idea of taking power 'on behalf of': a revolution which is not 'on behalf of' but self-moving has no need to even think of 'taking power'." (9)*

At the root of this argument is a giant *non-sequiter*. The premise of fetishisation-as-process doesn't lead to the strategic conclusions that Holloway asserts. Let's look at the argument in more detail.

First, are fetishised social relations a structure or a process? Capitalist social relations have to be constantly reproduced and to that extent they are certainly a process. But they also pre-exist; they have been definitely constituted and are not subject to daily disruption and collapse (which is why Holloway's notion of the permanent crisis and instability of capitalism is wrong - see below). Every time workers turn up for work, the social relations of capitalism exploitation do not have to be re-made or re-invented; of course they are reproduced, if you want they are reiterated - but that is the normal process of capitalist reproduction. Looked at from the reverse angle, capitalist social relations are not daily challenged, threatened or put in question. That only *begins* to happen at times of acute political crisis, of revolutionary or pre-revolutionary upsurge. Because he lacks any notion of the political, Holloway must remain literally speechless in front of such events.

But it is these moments of crisis that the issue of 'power' is put on the table. What would Holloway have said, for example, to the revolutionary workers in Catalonia in 1936-7. Create alternative social relations, on a non-capitalist basis? But that is exactly what they did start to do, as anyone with a passing familiarity to those events will know. Firms were collectivised, land was seized by the peasants, the basis of an alternative, popular system of administration based on the committees and collectives could be seen in outline. Ditto in Chile 1971-3. Ditto in Portugal 1974-5, and many other examples could be quoted. But what happened? In each of those cases the revolutionary mass 'vanguard' was unable to seize or consolidate national political (state) power, and they were defeated, isolated, crushed - in Spain and Chile with terrifying and bloody consequences. By abandoning the terrain of the political and the strategic, Holloway's ideas leave the decisive arena of struggle to capitalist or pro-capitalist forces who will inevitably occupy it, preventing revolutionary change.

Now I'm going to parade some evidence strongly in favour of Holloway's position and against what has been said above. A recent article in the London *Observer* gave a fascinating insight into the struggles in the poor barrios of Caracas, focus of the Bolivarian 'revolution' in Hugo Chavez's Venezuela. Local people are taking over the running of their own lives in a gigantic scale. Water and electricity, schools, food aid for the poorest - every aspect of local administration is being taken over

by the people themselves. One local activist is quoted as saying *"We don't want a government - we want to be the government"*. Surely this kind of activity is exactly what Holloway is talking about?

The statement by the local activist encapsulates an entirely positive and progressive attitude, a revolutionary attitude, to capitalism and the capitalist state. But then *how* can 'we', the people, the poor, the excluded, 'be the government'. That's the crux of the matter. Anyone who says to these activists "do exactly what you are doing, period" is doing them a big disservice. Their ability to begin to change social relations at a local level depends on the national political process, the whole 'Bolivarian' process and the existence of the Chavez government. If Chavez is brought down by local reaction and American imperialism, these local experiments in people's power will be crushed. That's the weakness of not integrating local process of power-changing with the national struggle for an alternative national state.

The article referred to above has interesting hints of conflict between the Bolivarian committees and some local activists, with the latter expressing resentment at local 'politicos' trying to intrude on their struggles. Such conflicts - which also occurred in Argentina - are a normal and inevitable part of revolutionary change. They are in reality a debate over perspectives. And it's natural that for some activists the whole huge project of changing the government and the state sometimes seems abstract and utopian, contrasted with the eminently practical tasks of solving people's needs here and now. Such attitudes are reinforced by the real manipulative and bureaucratic practices found in some organisations of the revolutionary and not-so-revolutionary left. But in the end they are wrong and self-defeating.

In accepting that social relations can be directly transformed simply by the social practices of the oppressed, Holloway abandons the terrain of strategy, and indeed of politics altogether. Marxists are bound to say to him that revolutionaries must, in one sense, be 'initiates' in power, learning the tricks and tactics of the very sordid business of politics. There are indeed negative consequences from this. It would be very nice indeed to proceed straight to alternative social relations without going through all this disgusting, murky business of building parties and fighting for power. As Ernest Mandel would have said, this is unfortunately impossible in 'this wicked world of ours'.

Holloway's pure naivety on this is revealed in a very interesting section on the struggles of 'anti-power:-

*"Look at the world around us, look beyond the newspapers, beyond the institutions of the labour movement and you can see a world of struggle: the autonomous municipalities in Chiapas, the students at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico, the Liverpool dockers, the wave of international demonstrations against the power of money capital, the struggle of migrant workers...There is a whole world of struggle that does not aim at winning power, a whole world of struggle against power-over...There is a whole world of struggle that...develops forms of self-determination and develops an alternative conceptions of how the world should be."* (10)

Well, true, sort of. But if we scratch the surface of the three particular struggles Holloway mentions, then we get a slightly different story. First, the Liverpool dockers. A struggle by a smallish group of workers, which was internationalised in an exemplary way, with solidarity actions from dockers and seafarers on several continents. Behind the scenes, however, several British Marxist organisations devoted considerable time and energy to building that struggle and creating the international links. That struggle would not have proceeded in the way it did without that intervention. Holloway doesn't know the facts perhaps, but I can give him the names and phone numbers of key revolutionary full-timers involved.

Second, the UNAM students one-year struggle against the imposition of student fees (1998-9). John

Holloway should know more about that because much of his time is spent in Mexico. That struggle was led (I would say in some ways mis-led) by a coalition of rather ultra-left Marxist groups. For better or worse, they were able to rely on the support of up to five or six thousand of the most determined strikers, who could lead the others. It was not a struggle without political leadership; that leadership does indeed want to gain power, but given their ultra-left semi-Stalinist character, have no chance of succeeding - anyway, let's hope so.

Finally, what about the Holloway's key inspiration, the Zapatistas? The autonomous village assemblies are indeed exemplary, but what are they autonomous *from* exactly? Not political organisation and leadership, for absolute certainty. The Zapatista movement has three wings: the EZLN, the armed fighters; the base communities in the highland villages; and the Frente Zapatista, the FZLN, the nationwide support organisation. Leading all three politically is the Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee, precise membership unknown (ie it is clandestine), with a key figure being Subcomandante Marcos. This is the leadership of a political organisation, which is in effect an ersatz political party, the denials of the Subcomandante and his followers notwithstanding. You can be absolutely sure that if the base communities are debating an important question, it will have first been discussed in the clandestine leadership based in the selva. Village democracy is not exactly spontaneous.

Equally, the FZLN do not do a single thing without it being authorised by the Subcomandante personally. The democracy of the FZLN is not exactly transparent. If it has not become a nationwide party it is partly because Marcos did not want it to escape his control.

### **Marxism, science, consciousness**

To anticipate a little, John Holloway's case against the idea that Marxism is some kind of science consists of the following key points.

- 1) Marxists after Engels have held the view that science in general and Marxism in particular seeks objective knowledge of the real world. Revolutionary theory by contrast is critical and negative; objective knowledge is impossible.
- 2) Engels and subsequent Marxist made Marxism a teleology - ie history is a process with an inevitable outcome, socialism. This downplays and eliminates the role of struggle.
- 3) By seeing the party (or the proletarian vanguard) as possessing knowledge which the masses do not possess, orthodox Marxists set up an authoritarian and manipulative relationship between the party and the masses. The category of false consciousness must be rejected, we are all victims of fetishisation, Marxist militants included. Gramsci's notion of hegemony is thus wrong.
- 4) By posing an end-point or goal for the struggle (ie socialism or communism), orthodox Marxists inevitably attempt to 'channel' and direct the struggles of the masses towards their preconceived ends. The notion of revolutionary rupture is imposed on the struggle from 'the outside'.

To answer all these points in detail would take a long book, but the main answer which revolutionary marxists should give to this charge sheet is 'not guilty'. However, some of the individual points contain an element of truth, in particular in relation to the Marxism of the Second International, and the 'Marxism' of Stalinism internationally. But many of the views ascribed to revolutionary marxism by Holloway are just not held by most people in the movement who think about these things.

Is Marxism a science? Does science provide objective knowledge of the world? Is such knowledge

possible? Before giving some provisional answer to those questions, it should be said that Holloway's own answer to them - a bowdlerisation of ideas from the Frankfurt School - cannot be accepted:

*"The concept of fetishism implies a negative concept of science...The concept of fetishism implies therefore that there is a radical distinction between 'bourgeois' science and critical or revolutionary science. The former assumes the permanence of capitalist social relations and takes identity for granted, treating contradiction as a mark of logical inconsistency. Science in this view is an attempt to understand reality. In the latter case, science can only be negative, a critique of the untruth of existing reality. The aim is not to understand reality, but to understand (and, by understanding, to intensify) its contradictions as part of the struggle to change the world. The more all-pervasive we understand reification to be, the more absolutely negative science becomes. If everything is permeated by reification, then absolutely everything is a site of struggle between the imposition of the rupture of doing and the critical-practical struggle for recuperation of doing. No category is neutral."* (11)

A first thing which is obvious about this passage is the idea that science which wants to understand the world can't tolerate contradiction, because this is a sign of logical inconsistency. Any Marxist will tell you that our view is that contradiction in reality (not just thought) is a fundamental epistemological proposition of any real science.

In general Holloway's arguments pose completely false alternatives. One reading of it could postulate an absolute break between 'revolutionary' science and 'bourgeois' science; the worst consequences of that idea were the bizarre products of the Soviet academy. If followed logically, Holloway's idea of science would lead to a rejection of Nils Bohr or Albert Einstein on the grounds that their insights into wave and particle theory, or relativity, were not part of the struggle to change the world.

Most Marxists would argue that science has to be critical and 'dialectical' to produce knowledge, attempting to understand the contradictions in reality, social as well as physical. This 'dialectical' approach has been massively aided by the advent of chaos theory, which has struck a tremendous blow against the false dichotomies which bourgeois philosophy opened up between determinism and indeterminism. Chaos theory has shown that events can be determined, ie have causes which can be established, but also have indeterminate, unpredictable outcomes. Far from being a rejection of dialectical thought, this insight is a confirmation of it, or rather a deepening of it. (An extended discussion of these themes can be found in Daniel Bensaid's book *Marx for Our Times*). But it is true that the insights of chaos theory are incompatible with the view of scientific predictability advanced by Engels in his famous 'parallelogram of forces'.

A number of consequences for our ideas about science follow. To say that science can produce knowledge of the real world is not the same thing as saying that the outcomes of all events can be predicted, not because we lack sufficient knowledge about causes, but *by definition*. Chaos theory has shown the limits of prediction, but they are not absolute. The range of possible outcomes of many physical and social processes can be known and predicted in advance. If this was not so, all science would be useless. We could never build a bridge, invent a new medicine or walk down the street.

John Holloway establishes a false polarity between positive and negative science, between knowledge and critique. It is possible to produce real knowledge of the world without that being part of the revolutionary struggle. It is also possible to produce real knowledge of social processes, without that leading to the view that social reality is governed by impermeable 'objective laws' with an inevitable outcome.

Thus, few Marxists today would argue that socialism is 'inevitable', that history has a preconceived end or outcome. Socialism is an objective, a goal we fight for, but it is the product of theoretical reflection. But not just that. That theoretical reflection is itself a reflection of contradictions in reality, ie the class struggle in capitalist society. To misquote Marx, theory tends towards reality and (hopefully) reality towards theory.

John Holloway claims Marxists think they possess objective knowledge that the masses do not:

*"The notion of Marxism as science implies a distinction between those who know and those who do not know, a distinction between those who have true consciousness and those who have false consciousness...Political debate become focused on the question of 'correctness' and the 'correct line'. But how do we know (and how do they know) that the knowledge of those who know is correct? How can the knowers (party, intellectuals, or whatever) be said to transcend the conditions of their social time and place in such a way to have gained a privileged knowledge of historical movement. Perhaps even more important politically: if a distinction is made between those who know and those who do not, and if understanding or knowledge is seen as important in guiding the political struggle, then what is the organisational relation between the knowers and the others (the masses)? Are those in the know to lead and educate the masses (as in the concept of the vanguard party) or is a communist revolution necessarily the work of the masses themselves (as 'left communists' such as Pennekoek maintained)?*

"...The notion of objective laws opens up a separation between structure and struggle. Whereas the notion of fetishism suggests that everything is struggle, that nothing exists separately from the antagonisms of social relations, the notion of 'objective laws' suggests a duality between an objective structural movement independent of people's will, on the one hand, and the subjective struggles for a better world on the other." (12)

When Marxists say that a certain view, or suggested course of action, is 'correct' they do not thereby ascribe the status of absolute, objective knowledge to this category - or at least they shouldn't. All knowledge is provisional and subject to falsification. When discussing a course of action, 'correct' usually is a short-hand for 'the most appropriate in the situation'. On the other hand, when Marxists say things like 'the invasion of Iraq is an example of imperialism' they are indeed suggesting the existence of a category in social reality which is knowable and revealed by theoretical abstraction. Holloway must agree that such a process is possible, otherwise he wouldn't have written his book.

Marxists do not claim they have 'true consciousness' (whatever that might be) against the false consciousness of the masses. But they do claim that critical social theory is possible, and that this can develop concepts which help us to understand the development of capitalism and the struggle against it. Holloway's suggestion that this is impossible, because Marxists are themselves products of particular times and social situations, is plainly ridiculous. Of course they are, and Marxism is the product of particular times and circumstances. Its concepts are provisional (not absolute knowledge) which provide a framework for understanding and acting on the world. This understanding is not absolute or 'objective', it is partial and fragmentary. Its criterion has to be whether it is useful for understanding the world and acting upon it. Its falsification has to be in practice and struggle. If we don't have this attitude to revolutionary theory, then we abandon not just the terrain of strategy and politics, but theory as well.

Holloway's notion that we are all products of fetishisation and reification should not necessarily lead him to reject the notion of false consciousness; he could equally well say we all have false consciousness. There is a kernel of truth to that. It's just that some people have a consciousness which is more false than others. That may sound like a joke, but if Holloway rejects it we really do get into ridiculous territory. Can John Holloway really say that the views of someone who is a racist

and nationalist are as equally valid as those who are revolutionary internationalists? Marxist theory may be partial and conditional, but surely it approximates to an understanding of the world which is critical of the existing social order, and provides insights into its contradictions and the possibilities for changing it.

There are big dangers in Holloway's view. By effectively rejecting the idea of false consciousness, he rejects the notion of ideology as something separate from (but linked to) reification and fetishism. Underestimating ideology leads to a lack of understanding of the ideological apparatuses of modern capitalism, which are massively powerful in generating and reiterating fetishised, pro-capitalist views. A possible consequence of this, logically, is a lack of understanding of the centrality of ideological struggle, of the necessity for a ceaseless fight - in propaganda and agitation as well as 'theory' - against the 'false' ideas pumped out by the pro-capitalist media (and academy) on a daily basis. This counter-struggle does not emerge spontaneously on any effective national basis. It has to be organised. This was something that Lenin was trying to say in a much-misrepresented text he wrote in 1902. But that's another story.

### **Strategic conclusions: a world without left parties**

John Holloway doesn't have any strategic conclusions, and unapologetically. There is, he says, "no guarantee of a happy outcome". Here, unfortunately, we can only agree. But unlike recent detractors of revolutionary parties, he doesn't put up alternative organisations - social movements, NGOs - as competitors for the crown of the 'modern prince'. He doesn't deny the need for co-ordinations for particular purposes and struggles, or the need for political militants. However, he is not interested in new or alternative organisations. We should look at the movement not as organisation, but - inspired by the cycle of anti-capitalist demonstrations - as "a series of events". And that's it, full stop.

Happily Holloway's ideas, some of which are widespread, will not convince everybody. If by some unforeseen accident they did, the consequences would be catastrophic. Disband the left organisations and parties and disband the trade unions. Forget elections and the fight over government. All that remains is the struggle of 'power-to' against 'power over'.

Not only will these ideas not become hegemonic on the left, it is structurally impossible for them to do so, as a moment's thought will reveal. Imagine, in a party-less world, five or six friends in different parts of any country, involved in anti-war coalitions, get together and discuss politics. They find they agree on many things - not just war, but racism, poverty and capitalist power. They decide to hold regular meetings and invite others. Next, they produce a small newsletter to sell to comrades in the anti-war coalitions. In six months they discover a hundred people are coming to their meetings, and decide to hold a conference. In effect, they have formed a political party. And - obviously - if nobody else on the left forms an alternative, they'll have hundreds of members in a year. Revolutionary parties cannot be done away with, not until the work they have to do is done away with as well. The sooner the better.

1. John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power, The Meaning of Revolution Today*, Pluto Press 2002, p. 11.

2. op. cit., p. 12.

3. op. cit., p. 13.

4. op. cit., p. 15.

5. op. cit., p. 153.

6. op. cit., p. 159.

7. op. cit., p. 156.

8. op. cit., p. 108.

9. op. cit., p. 156.

\*. From the name of Bowdler who rewrote Shakespeare's texts for them to be more accessible: impoverment.

10. op. cit., p. 118.

11. Une discussion développée de ces thèmes peut être trouvée dans le livre de Daniel Bensaïd, Marx l'intempestif, Fayard 1995).

12. op. cit., p. 122.

---

## **P.S.**

\* Published on "Socialist Restance" website.