

Take the Power to Change the World

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Written version of Hearse'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 Hilary Wainwright. Their contributions are also available on our website, except the one of Bertinotti (not received).

Subcommandante Marcos focussed this debate in the 1990s by his declaration that the Zapatistas refused, as a matter of principle, to fight for state power. I don't want to attack Marcos too much, because in my opinion the real start of the anti-globalisation movement and the fightback against neoliberalism was the Zapatista uprising on 1 January 1994. But Marcos and those who think like him are wrong to believe that anti-capitalist social transformation is possible without dealing with the question of state power, by simply turning your back on the state.

This can be seen by looking at some crucial contemporary social struggles. First, Argentina. In my opinion in the last four years the social and political struggle in Argentina has been the most advanced in the world. When the Argentinean economy collapsed in December 2001, a direct result of 'dollarisation' and extreme neo-liberal policies, the savings and livelihood of millions of working class and middle class Argentineans was expropriated. This led to a massive social explosion.

As a consequence a massive process of self-organisation developed, including the formation of neighbourhood and factory committees, the occupation of factories, which continued production under workers' self-management, the piqueteros movement, and many other forms of struggle. Self-organisation on a massive scale, while all the capitalist parties and leaders were completely discredited. But where is this movement today? It has largely disappeared or even been co-opted into government work projects at poverty wages.

Naomi Klein wrote a widely published article in which she said the decline of the mass movement was because of the sectarianism of the far-left organisations. She claims they brought their ideological arguments and petty squabbles into the movement, and as a consequence the masses became bored and frustrated and went home.

I don't discount the possibility that there is an element of truth on what she says about these organisations, but it is not the fundamental problem. The basic problem is there was no big anti-capitalist party capable of uniting the movements and struggles in an overall project for taking the power. That's my criticism of the Argentinean left groups - that despite all the opportunities they failed to create such a party on a united basis, when they have had more opportunities in the past 30 years than in most countries.

The decline of the Argentinean movement is a massive tragedy because for a time in that country there was a real vacuum at the top, and an anti-capitalist way out of the crisis was possible. Now we just have capitalist normalisation and the return of the corrupt and right-wing Peronists. As James Petras has put it, "The original strength of the popular uprising - its spontaneous, mass, autonomous character - became its strategic weakness, the absence of a national leadership capable of unifying

the diverse forces behind a coherent program aimed at taking state power.” (This article is available at www.rebellion.com)

The same problem is posed in a different context in Venezuela. In 2003 the London Observer newspaper published a very interesting article reporting from the massively self-organised barrios in Caracas. The reporter told of how the people were taking over the schools and utilities like water and electricity, organising literacy campaigns and so on. One militant told the reporter “We don’t want a government like that of Hugo Chavez to represent us, we want to be the government.” This article also told of some hostility to the Bolivarian circles among some barrio activists, accusing them of dragging politics into the struggles.

I sympathise with these anti-government and anti-state feelings, but ultimately they are a dead-end and a trap. Why is there this tremendous Bolivarian process, this enormous level of struggle against the right wing and the bourgeoisie, in Venezuela? *Because of the election of a left-wing government.* Where have all the resources come from for the literacy campaign, the pension and wage increases, the free children’s breakfast programme? From the government, of course.

If you say we must turn your back on the state and power, then it becomes a matter of indifference, completely irrelevant, if Hugo Chavez is defeated in the right-wing referendum, because all that is about the state and doesn’t concern us.

In reality, if Hugo Chavez had been defeated in the August 23 referendum it would have been a massive defeat for the Bolivarian revolutionary process - in fact it would have ended it in a carnival of reaction. Vast numbers of the working class and the poor understood this and did not turn their backs on Chavez and their revolution. They came down from the barrios in their millions to vote for Chavez and deal the hysterical bourgeoisie, the reactionary petty-bourgeoisie and US imperialism a fearful political blow.

Now I don’t say that Chavez, a left-wing populist, is the final answer to socialist transformation in Venezuela. I say we defend him against the right wing. But to progress towards the victory of the Bolivarian revolution the Venezuelan masses need to create their own self-organised system of national administration. That’s not turning your back on the state, that’s creating a different kind of state and a different kind of power.

You can see the same thing in Mexico. The Zapatistas have created their own self-organised space in the highland villages of Chiapas, formally declaring their own independent municipalities in September 2003. All that is true. But it is the product of very particular circumstances, of geographical isolation and the fact that these communities are defended by the whole of Mexican civil society. For the moment, it is too politically dangerous for the Mexican bourgeoisie to launch any kind of all-out attack. In the future, this could easily change.

However, autonomy has not solved the problems of the Zapatista base communities. They are impoverished communities, and the people there share the same problems of health, of nutrition and of living standards of poor people in many other parts of Mexico. Because the Zapatista movement raises questions which cannot be solved simply at the level of their own communities, or even at the level of the whole of Chiapas. To bring the indigenous people of Chiapas out of poverty, you need social transformation at (at least) an all-Mexico level.

I will pose John Holloway a question. The Zapatistas have created their own liberated zone, through their own uprising. But suppose the same thing happened all across Mexico - the masses rose up and took control of their own workplaces and communities. Now, shouldn’t these self-organised communities in Veracruz, in Monterrey, in Mexico City, in Guadalajara - shouldn’t they talk to each

other? Plan their futures together? Co-ordinate their economic plans in an overall plan of social development of Mexico? Elect recallable representatives to an all-Mexico assembly to decide these things? Co-ordinate their response to the massive counter-revolutionary wave which is sure to hit them from inside and outside the country?

Obviously they should. If they simply turn their back on the Mexican capitalist state without replacing it with something else, well the capitalist state will not turn its back on them. But if they do create their own national, self-governed co-ordination, than they will have created what is the slogan of the whole of the militant Mexican left - "Un gobierno obrera, campesino, indigena y popular" - a workers', peasant, indigenous and popular government. Not only that: they will have created an alternative form of power, an alternative form of state. Exactly what Marx called the 'Commune state'.

John Holloway rejects both any alternative form of state and any form of political party. In my opinion the refusal to form political parties of the left, and a refusal to fight for any alternative form of state power, are both disastrous choices.

Today in many parts of the world there is an enormous crisis of political representation of the working class and the oppressed, as a result of the old social democratic and Stalinist parties going off to the right. This threatens the presence of the working class in the national political arena, and far from being a positive thing, this has a negative impact not only on the national political discourse, but on the struggles and mass campaigns as well. To see this, look at the example of the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP).

The SSP now has six deputies in the Scottish parliament and a significant electoral impact (up to 10% of the vote). Is this a bad thing, a diversion? I don't think so. In fact the activity of the SSP deputies, who are always on the picket lines outside factories, who have led the campaign against racist immigrations laws and the Iraq war, and who are regularly being arrested protesting outside the Faslane nuclear submarine base, is a positive factor in the struggles, and not counterposed to it.

Equally the existence of Ridondazione Comunista in Italy or the United Left in Spain is, for the moment at least, a very positive factor for the struggle. I agree with Antonio Gramsci: the political party is the 'modern prince'. Social struggle always strives to find a political representation, and this we cannot turn our backs on. Today means not trying to find largely mythical autonomous spaces in which we can try to hide from the state, but building united left parties on an anti-capitalist basis to propel the struggle forward. Another world is possible, *but not without a revolution*.

P.S.

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