

Change the World without taking power?...or... Take Power to change the world?

*A Debate on Strategies on
how to build another world ...*

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Articles included are:

(in the following order...)

- 1) On a Recent Book by John Holloway**
by Daniel Bensaid 2005

- 2) "Drive your cart and your plough over the bones of the dead"**
by John Holloway 2005

- 3) Screams and Spit**
by Daniel Bensaid

- 4) A Critical Review of John Holloway's Book:
To change the World Without Taking Power?**
by Phil Hearse 2003

- 5) Power and the State**
by John Holloway, 16 October 2004

- 6) Response to John Holloway**
*"Change the world by transforming power – including state power!"
by Hilary Wainwright, 16 October 2004*

- 7) Take the power to change the world**
by Phil Hearse, 16 October 2004

- 8) A Debate between John Holloway and Alex Callinicos:
"Can we change the world without taking power?"**
*World Social Forum, Porto Alegre
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Change the World Without Taking Power or Take Power to Change the World?

John Holloway's book, *Change the World Without Taking Power* (London, Pluto Press, 2002) has provoked wide-ranging debate on the left in Latin America (where Holloway is based) and beyond, and particularly in the global justice movement. We have brought together here a number of documents which reflect this debate – articles and speeches by some of Holloway's critics, with replies by him.

We start with a critique of Holloway's book by Daniel Bensaïd, a French philosopher, author of many books on politics and philosophy, and a leading member of the French Revolutionary Communist League (LCR). There follows a reply by Holloway to a series of his critics, including Bensaïd, and Bensaïd's reply to the reply.

The next document is a critical review of Holloway's book by Phil Hearse, a longtime political activist and journalist in Britain who is an editor of the paper *Socialist Resistance*. There follow transcripts of a debate that took place in October 2004 at the European Social Forum in London, around the theme "Strategies for Social Transformation". The protagonists were Holloway, Hearse, Hilary Wainwright (writer, editor of the journal *Red Pepper* and activist in the global justice movement) and Fausto Bertinotti of the Italian Party for Communist Refoundation. Unfortunately there appears to be no written record of Bertinotti's contribution, but we publish the other three.

Finally, we publish the transcript of a debate that took place at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in January 2005 between Alex Callinicos and Holloway, including contributions from the floor. Callinicos is a leading member of the British Socialist Workers' Party, who has written widely on politics and philosophy and has been particularly concerned with the perspectives for and debates in the global justice movement.

These documents do not by any means represent the whole of the debate. A number of other contributions have been written by Latin American activists and have not been translated into English. Nor do they conclude the debate, which deals with fundamental issues which concern all those who want to change the world and which are of particular relevance to the movements sweeping Latin America today.

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On a Recent Book by John Holloway

Daniel Bensaid

2005

Can we speak of a libertarian current, as if this continuous thread were unrolling throughout contemporary history, as if it were possible to tie a sufficient number of affinities to it to make what holds it together win out over what divides it? Such a current, if in fact it exists, is indeed characterised by a considerable theoretical eclecticism, and crosscut by strategic orientations that not only diverge but also often contradict each other. We can nonetheless maintain the hypothesis that there is a libertarian ‘tone’ or ‘sensibility’ that is broader than anarchism as a specifically defined political position. It is thus possible to speak of a libertarian communism (exemplified notably by Daniel Guérin), a libertarian messianism (Walter Benjamin), a libertarian Marxism (Michael Löwy and Miguel Abensour), and even a ‘libertarian Leninism’ whose especial source is *State and Revolution*.

This ‘family resemblance’ (often torn apart and stitched back together) is not enough to found a coherent genealogy. We can instead refer to ‘libertarian moments’ registered in very different situations and drawing their inspiration from quite distinct theoretical sources. We can distinguish three key moments in rough outline:

► A constituent (or classic) moment exemplified by the trio Stirner/Proudhon/Bakunin. *The Ego and Its Own* (Stirner) and *The Philosophy of Poverty* (Proudhon) were published in the mid-1840s. During those same years Bakunin’s thought was shaped over the course of a long and winding journey that took him from Berlin to Brussels by way of Paris. This was the watershed moment in which the period of post-revolutionary reaction drew to a close and the uprisings of 1848 were brewing. The modern state was taking shape. A new consciousness of individuality was discovering the chains of modernity in the pain of romanticism. An unprecedented social movement was stirring up the depths of a people that was being fractured and divided by the eruption of class struggle. In this transition, between ‘already-no-longer’ and ‘not-yet’, different forms of libertarian thought were flirting with blooming utopias and romantic ambivalences. A dual movement was being sketched out of breaking with and being pulled towards the liberal tradition. Daniel Cohn-Bendit’s identification with a ‘liberal-libertarian’ orientation follows in the footsteps of this formative ambiguity.

► An anti-institutional or anti-bureaucratic moment, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The experience of parliamentarianism and mass trade unionism was revealing at that time ‘the professional dangers of power’ and the bureaucratisation threatening the labour movement. The diagnosis can be found in Rosa Luxemburg’s work as well as in Robert Michels’ classic book on *Political Parties* (1910) (1); in the revolutionary syndicalism of Georges Sorel and Fernand Pelloutier; and equally in the critical fulgurations of Gustav Landauer. We also find traces of it in Péguy’s *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* (2) or in Labriola’s Italian Marxism.

► A third, post-Stalinist moment responds to the great disillusionment of the tragic century of extremes. A neo-libertarian current, more diffuse but more influential than the direct heirs of classical anarchism, is confusedly emerging. It constitutes a state of mind, a ‘mood’, rather than a well-defined orientation. It is engaging with the aspirations (and weaknesses) of the renascent social movements. The themes of authors like Toni Negri and John Holloway (3) are thus much more inspired by Foucault and Deleuze than by historic 19th-century sources, of which classic anarchism itself scarcely exercises its right to make a critical inventory. (4)

Amidst these ‘moments’ we can find ferrymen (like Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and Karl Korsch) who initiate the transition and critical transmission of the revolutionary heritage, ‘rubbing against the grain’ of the Stalinist glaciation.

The contemporary resurgence and metamorphoses of libertarian currents are easily explained:

- by the depth of the defeats and disappointments experienced since the 1930s, and by the heightened consciousness of the dangers that threaten a politics of emancipation from within;
- by the deepening of the process of individualisation and the emergence of an ‘individualism without individuality’, anticipated in the controversy between Stirner and Marx; and
- by the steadily fiercer forms of resistance to the disciplinary contrivances and procedures of bio-political control on the part of those who are being subjected to a subjectivity mutilated by market reification.

In this context, in spite of the profound disagreements that we will expound in this article, we are glad to grant Negri and Holloway’s contributions the merit of relaunching a much-needed strategic debate in the movements of resistance to imperial globalisation, after a sinister quarter-century in which this kind of debate had withered away, while those who refused to surrender to the (un)reason of the triumphant market swung back and forth between a rhetoric of resistance without any horizon of expectation and the fetishist expectation of some miraculous event. We have taken up elsewhere the critique of Negri and his evolution. (5) Here we will begin a discussion with John Holloway, whose recent book bears a title that is a programme in itself and has already provoked lively debates in both the English-speaking world and Latin America.

Statism as original sin

In the beginning was the scream. John Holloway’s approach starts from imperative of unconditional resistance: we scream! It is a cry not only of rage, but also of hope. We let out a scream, a scream against, a negative scream, the Zapatistas’ scream in Chiapas - ‘*Ya Basta! Enough of this!*’ - a scream of refusal to submit, of dissent. ‘The aim of this book’, Holloway announces from the start, ‘is to strengthen negativity, to take the side of the fly in the web, to make the scream more strident (6). What has brought the Zapatistas (whose experience haunts Holloway’s disquisition throughout) together with others ‘is not a positive common class composition but rather the community of their negative struggle

against capitalism' (7). Holloway is thus describing a struggle whose aim is to negate the inhumanity that has been imposed on us, in order to recapture a subjectivity that is immanent in negativity itself. We have no need of a promise of a happy end to justify our rejection of the world as it is. Like Foucault, Holloway wants stay connected with the million, multiple forms of resistance, which are irreducible to the binary relation between capital and labour.

Yet this way of taking sides by crying out is not enough. It is also necessary to be able to give an account of the great disillusionment of the last century. Why did all those cries, those millions of cries, repeated millions of times over, not only leave capital's despotic order standing but even leave it more arrogant than ever? Holloway thinks he has the answer. The worm was in the apple; that is, the (theoretical) vice was originally nestled inside the emancipatory virtue: statism was gnawing away at most variants of the workers' movement from the beginning. Changing the world by means of the state thus constituted in his eyes the dominant paradigm of revolutionary thought, which was subjected from the 19th century on to an instrumental, functional vision of the state. The illusion that society could be changed by means of the state flowed (Holloway says) from a certain idea of state sovereignty. But we have ended up learning that 'we cannot change the world through the state', which only constitutes 'a node in a web of power relations' (8). This state must not be confused in fact with power. All it does is define the division between citizens and non-citizens (the foreigner, the excluded, Gabriel Tarde's man 'rejected by the world' or Arendt's pariah). The state is thus very precisely what the word suggests: 'a bulwark against change, against the flow of doing', or in other words 'the embodiment of identity' (9). It is not a thing that can be laid hold of in order to turn it against those who have controlled it until now, but rather a social form, or, more accurately, a process of formation of social relations: 'a process of statification of social conflict' (10). Claiming to struggle by means of the state thus leads inevitably to defeating oneself. Stalin's 'statist strategies' thus do not for Holloway constitute in any sense a betrayal of Bolshevism's revolutionary spirit, but its complete fulfilment: 'the logical outcome of a state-centred concept of social change' (11). The Zapatista challenge by contrast consists of saving the revolution from the collapse of the statist illusion and at the same time from the collapse of the illusion of power.

Before we go any further in reading Holloway's book, it is already apparent:

- ▶ That he has reduced the luxuriant history of the workers' movement, its experiences and controversies to a single line of march of statism through the ages, as if very different theoretical and strategic conceptions had not been constantly battling with each other. He thus presents an imaginary Zapatismo as something absolutely innovative, haughtily ignoring the fact that the actually existing Zapatista discourse bears within it, albeit without knowing it, a number of older themes.
- ▶ By his account the dominant paradigm of revolutionary thought consists of a functionalist statism. We could accept that - only by swallowing the very dubious assumption that the majoritarian ideology of social democracy (symbolised by Noskes and other Eberts) and the bureaucratic Stalinist orthodoxy can both be subsumed under the elastic heading of 'revolutionary thought'. This is taking very little account of an abundant critical literature on the question of the state, which ranges from Lenin and

Gramsci to contemporary polemics (12) by way of contributions that are impossible to ignore (whether one agrees with them or not) like those of Poulantzas and Altvater.

■ Finally, reducing the whole history of the revolutionary movement to the genealogy of a ‘theoretical deviation’ makes it possible to hover over real history with a flap of angelic wings, but at the risk of endorsing the reactionary thesis (from François Furet to Gérard Courtois) of an unbroken continuity from the October Revolution to the Stalinist counter-revolution - its ‘logical outcome’! - incidentally without subjecting Stalinism to any serious analysis. David Rousset, Pierre Naville, Moshe Lewin, Mikhaïl Guefter (not to speak of Trotsky or Hannah Arendt, or even of Lefort or Castoriadis), are far more serious on this point.

The vicious circle of fetishism, or, how to get out of it?

The other source of the revolutionary movement’s strategic divagations relates in Holloway’s account to the abandonment (or forgetting) of the critique of fetishism that Marx introduced in the first volume of *Capital*. On this subject Holloway provides a useful, though sometimes quite sketchy, reminder. Capital is nothing other than past activity (dead labour) congealed in the form of property. Thinking in terms of property comes down however to thinking of property as a thing, in the terms of fetishism itself, which means in fact accepting the terms of domination. The problem does not derive from the fact that the capitalists own the means of production: ‘Our struggle’, Holloway insists, ‘is not the struggle to make ours the property of the means of production, but to dissolve both property and means of production: to recover or, better, create the conscious and confident sociality of the flow of doing.’ (13)

But how can the vicious circle of fetishism be broken? The concept, says Holloway, refers to the unbearable horror constituted by the self-negation of the act. He thinks that Capital is devoted above all to developing the critique of this self-negation. The concept of fetishism contains in concentrated form the critique of bourgeois society (its ‘enchanted ... world’ (14) and of bourgeois theory (political economy), and at the same time lays bare the reasons for their relative stability: the infernal whirligig that turns objects (money, machines, commodities) into subjects and subjects into objects. This fetishism worms its way into all the pores of society to the point that the more urgent and necessary revolutionary change appears, the more impossible it seems to become. Holloway sums this up in a deliberately disquieting turn of phrase: ‘the urgent impossibility of revolution’ (15).

This presentation of fetishism draws on several different sources: Lukács’ account of reification, Horkheimer’s account of instrumental rationality, Adorno’s account of the circle of identity, and Marcuse’s account of one-dimensional man. The concept of fetishism expresses for Holloway the power of capital exploding in our deepest selves like a missile shooting out a thousand coloured rockets. This is why the problem of revolution is not the problem of ‘them’ - the enemy, the adversary with a thousand faces - but first of all our problem, the problem that ‘we’, this ‘we’ fragmented by fetishism, constitute for ourselves.

The fetish, this 'real illusion', in fact enmeshes us in its toils and subjugates us. It makes the status of critique itself problematic: if social relationships are fetishised, how can we criticise them? And who, what superior and privileged beings, are the critics? In short, is critique itself still possible?

These are the questions, according to Holloway, that the notion of a vanguard, of an 'imputed' class consciousness (imputed by whom?), or the expectation of a redemptive event (the revolutionary crisis), claimed to answer. These solutions lead ineluctably to the problematic of a healthy subject or a champion of justice fighting against a sick society: a virtuous knight who could be incarnated in a 'working-class hero' or vanguard party.

This is a 'hard' conception of fetishism, which therefore leads to an insoluble double dilemma:

Is revolution conceivable? Is criticism still possible? How can we escape from this 'fetishisation of fetishism'? Who are we then to wield the corrosive power of critique? 'We are not God. We are not ... transcendent' (16)! And how can we avoid the dead end of a subaltern critique that remains under the ascendancy of the fetish that it is claiming to overthrow, inasmuch as negation implies subordination to what it negates?

Holloway puts forward several solutions:

- ▶ The reformist response, which concludes that the world cannot be radically transformed; we must content ourselves with rearranging it and fixing it around the edges. Today postmodernist rhetoric accompanies this form of resignation with its lesser chamber music.
- ▶ The traditional revolutionary response, which ignores the subtleties and marvels of fetishism and clings to the good old binary antagonism between capital and labour, so as to content itself with a change of ownership at the summit of the state: the bourgeois state simply becomes proletarian.
- ▶ A third way, which would consist by contrast of looking for hope in the very nature of capitalism and in its 'ubiquitous [or pluriform] power', to which a 'ubiquitous [or pluriform] resistance' is an appropriate response (17).

Holloway believes that he can escape in this way from the system's circularity and deadly trap, by adopting a soft version of fetishism, understood not as a state of affairs but as a dynamic and contradictory process of fetishisation. He thinks this process is in fact pregnant with its contrary: the 'anti-fetishisation' of forms of resistance immanent to fetishism itself. We are not mere objectified victims of capital, but actual or potential antagonistic subjects: 'Our existence-against—capital' is thus 'the inevitable constant negation of our existence-in-capital' (18)

Capitalism should be understood above all as separation from the subject and from the object, and modernity as the unhappy consciousness of this divorce. Within the problematic of fetishism the subject of capitalism is not the capitalist himself but the value that is valorised and becomes autonomous. Capitalists are nothing more than loyal agents of capital and of its impersonal despotism. But then for a functionalist Marxism

capitalism appears as a closed, internally consistent system without any possible exit, at least until the arrival of the *deus ex machina*, the great miraculous moment of revolutionary upheaval. For Holloway by contrast the weakness of capitalism consists in the fact that capital 'is dependent on labour in a way in which labour is not dependent upon capital': the 'insubordination of labour is thus the axis on which the constitution of capital as capital turns'. In the relationship of reciprocal but asymmetrical dependency between capital and labour, labour is thus capable of freeing itself from its opposite while capital is not (19).

Holloway thus draws his inspiration from the autonomist theses previously put forward by Mario Tronti, which reversed the terms of the dilemma by presenting capital's role as purely reactive to the creative initiative of labour. In this perspective labour, as the active element of capital, always determines capitalist development by means of class struggle. Tronti presented his approach as 'a Copernican revolution within Marxism'. (20) While beguiled by this idea, Holloway still has reservations about a theory of autonomy that tends to renounce the work of negation (and in Negri's case to renounce any dialectic in favour of ontology) and to treat the industrial working class as a positive, mythical subject (just as Negri treats the multitude in his last book). A radical inversion should not content itself with transferring capital's subjectivity to labour, Holloway says, but should rather understand subjectivity as a negation, not as a positive affirmation.

To conclude (provisionally) on this point, we should acknowledge the service John Holloway has done in putting the question of fetishism and reification back in the heart of the strategic enigma. We need nonetheless to note the limited novelty of his argument. While the 'orthodox Marxism' of the Stalinist period (including Althusser) had in fact discarded the critique of fetishism, its red thread had nevertheless never been broken: starting from Lukács, we can follow it through the works of the authors who belonged to what Ernst Bloch called 'the warm current of Marxism': Roman Rosdolsky, Jakubowski, Ernest Mandel, Henri Lefèbvre (in his *Critique of Everyday Life*), Lucien Goldmann, Jean-Marie Vincent (whose *Fétichisme et Société* dates back to 1973!) (21), and more recently Stavros Tombazos and Alain Bihr. (22)

Emphasising the close connection between the processes of fetishisation and anti-fetishisation, Holloway, after many detours, brings us once more to the contradiction of the social relationship that manifests itself in class struggle. Like Chairman Mao, he makes clear nonetheless that since the terms of the contradiction are not symmetrical, the pole of labour forms its dynamic, determinant element. It's a bit like the boy who wrapped his arm around his head in order to grab his nose. We may note however that Holloway's stress on the process of 'defetishisation' at work within fetishisation enables him to relativise ('defetishise'?) the question of property, which he declares without any further ado to be soluble in 'the flow of doing' (23).

Questioning the status of his own critique, Holloway fails to escape from the paradox of the sceptic who doubts everything except his own doubt. The legitimacy of his own critique thus continues to hang on the question 'in whose name' and 'from which (partisan?) standpoint' he proclaims this dogmatic doubt (ironically underscored in the book by Holloway's refusal to bring it to a full stop). In short, 'Who are we, we who criticise?' (24): privileged, marginal people, decentred intellectuals, deserters from the

system? Implicitly an intellectual elite, a kind of vanguard, Holloway admits. For once the choice has been made to dispense with or relativise class struggle, the role of the free-floating intellectual paradoxically emerges reinforced. We then quickly fail back once more into the - Kautskyist rather than Leninist - idea of science being brought by the intelligentsia 'into the proletarian class struggle from without' (by intellectuals in possession of scientific knowledge), rather than Lenin's idea of 'class political consciousness' (*not* science!) brought 'from outside the economic struggle' (*not* from outside the class struggle) by a party (*not* by a scientific intelligentsia). (25)

Decidedly, taking fetishism seriously does not make it easier to dispose of the old question of the vanguard, whatever word you use for it. After all, isn't Zapatismo still a kind of vanguard (and Holloway its prophet)?

'The Urgent Impossibility of Revolution'

Holloway proposes to return to the concept of revolution 'as a question, not as an answer' (26) What's at stake in revolutionary change is no longer 'taking power' for Holloway but the very existence of power: 'The problem of the traditional concept of revolution is perhaps not that it aimed too high, but that it aimed too low' (27). In fact, 'The only way in which revolution can now be imagined is not as the conquest of power but as the dissolution of power.' This and nothing else is what the Zapatistas, frequently cited as a reference point, mean when they declare that they want to create a world of humanity and dignity, 'but without taking power'. Holloway admits that this approach may not seem very realistic. While the experiences that inspire him have not aimed at taking power, neither have they - so far - succeeded in changing the world. Holloway simply (dogmatically?) asserts that there is no other way.

This certainty, however peremptory it may be, hardly brings us much further. How to change the world without taking power? The book's author confides in us.

At the end of the book, as at the beginning, we do not know. The Leninists know, or used to know. We do not. Revolutionary change is more desperately urgent than ever, but we do not know any more what revolution means.... [O]ur not-knowing is ... the not-knowing of those who understand that not-knowing is part of the revolutionary process. We have lost all certainty, but the openness of uncertainty is central to revolution. 'Asking we walk', say the Zapatistas. We ask not only because we do not know the way ...but also because asking the way is part of the revolutionary process itself. (28)

So here we are at the heart of the debate. On the threshold of the new millennium, we no longer know what future revolutions will be like. But we know that capitalism will not be eternal, and that we urgently need to cast it off before it crushes us. This is the first meaning of the idea of revolution: it expresses the recurrent aspiration of the oppressed to their liberation. We also know - after the political revolutions that gave birth to the modern nation-state, and after the trials of 1848, the Commune and the defeated revolutions of the 20th century - that the revolution will be social or it will not be. This is the second meaning that the word revolution has taken on, since the *Communist*

Manifesto. But on the other hand, after a cycle of mostly painful experiments, we have difficulty imagining the strategic form of revolutions to come. It is this third meaning of the word that escapes our grasp. This is not terribly new: nobody had planned the Paris Commune, soviet power or the Catalan Council of Militias. These forms of revolutionary power, ‘found at last’, were born of the struggle itself and from the subterranean memory of previous experiences.

Have so many beliefs and certainties vanished in mid-career since the Russian Revolution? Let us concede this (although I am not so sure of the reality of these certainties now so generously attributed to the credulous revolutionaries of yesteryear). This is no reason to forget the (often dearly paid) lessons of past defeats and the negative evidence of past setbacks. Those who thought they could ignore state power and its conquest have often been its victims: they didn’t want to take power, so power took them. And those who thought they could dodge it, avoid it, get around it, invest it or circumvent it without taking it have too often been thrashed by it. The process-like force of ‘defetishisation’ has not been enough to save them.

Even ‘Leninists’ (which ones?), Holloway says, no longer know (how to change the world). But did they ever, beginning with Lenin himself, claim to possess this doctrinaire knowledge that Holloway attributes to them? History is more complicated than that. In politics there can only be one kind of strategic knowledge: a conditional, hypothetical kind of knowledge, ‘a strategic hypothesis’ drawn from past experiences and serving as a plumb line, in the absence of which action disperses without attaining any results. The necessity of a hypothesis in no way prevents us from knowing that future experiences will always have their share of unprecedented, unexpected aspects, obliging us to correct it constantly. Renouncing any claim to dogmatic knowledge is thus not a sufficient reason to start from scratch and ignore the past, as long as we guard against the conformism that always threatens tradition (even revolutionary tradition). While waiting for new founding experiences, it would in fact be imprudent to frivolously forget what two centuries of struggles - from June 1848 to the Chilean and Indonesian counter-revolutions, by way of the Russian Revolution, the German tragedy and the Spanish Civil War - have so painfully taught us.

Until today there has never been a case of relations of domination not being torn asunder under the shock of revolutionary crises: strategic time is not the smooth time of the minute hand of a clock, but a jagged time whose pace is set by sudden accelerations and abrupt decelerations. At these critical moments forms of dual power have always emerged, posing the question ‘who will beat whom’. In the end no crisis has ever turned out well from the point of view of the oppressed without resolute intervention by a political force (whether you call it a party or a movement) carrying a project forward and capable of taking decisions and decisive initiatives.

We have lost our certainties, Holloway repeats like the hero played by Yves Montand in a bad movie (*Les Routes du Sud*, with a script by Jorge Semprun). No doubt we must learn to do without them. But wherever there is a struggle (whose outcome is uncertain by definition) there is a clash of opposing wills and convictions, which are not certainties but guides to action, subject to the always-possible falsifications of practice. We must say yes

to the ‘openness to uncertainty’ that Holloway demands, but no to a leap into a strategic void!

In the depths of this void the only possible outcome of the crisis is the event itself, but an event without actors, a purely mythical event, cut off from its historical conditions, which pulls loose from the realm of political struggle only to tumble into the domain of theology. This is what Holloway calls to mind when he invites his readers to think ‘of an anti-politics of events rather than a politics of organisation’ (29). The transition from a politics of organisation to an anti-politics of the event can find its way, he says, by means of the experiences of May ’68, the Zapatista rebellion or the wave of demonstrations against capitalist globalisation. These ‘events are flashes against fetishism, festivals of the non-subordinate, carnivals of the oppressed’ (30). Is carnival the form, found at long last, of the post-modern revolution?

Remembrance of subjects past

Will it be a revolution - a carnival - without actors? Holloway reproaches ‘identity politics’ with the ‘fixation of identities’: the appeal to what one is supposed to ‘be’ always in his eyes implies a crystallisation of identity, whereas there are no grounds for distinguishing between good and bad identities. Identities only take on meaning in a specific situation and in a transitory way: claiming a Jewish identity did not have the same significance in Nazi Germany that it does today in Israel. Referring to a lovely text in which Sub-Commandante Marcos champions the multiplicity of overlapping and superimposed identities under the anonymity of the famous ski-mask, Holloway goes so far as to present Zapatismo as an ‘explicitly anti-identitarian’ movement (31). The crystallisation of identity by contrast is for him the antithesis of reciprocal recognition, community, friendship and love, and a form of selfish solipsism. While identification and classificatory definition are weapons in the disciplinary arsenal of power, the dialectic expresses the deeper meaning of non-identity: ‘We, the non-identical, fight against this identification. The struggle against capital is the struggle against identification. It is not the struggle for an alternative identity.’ (32) Identifying comes down to thinking based on being, while thinking based on doing and acting is identifying and denying identification in one and the same movement (33). Holloway’s critique thus presents itself as an ‘an assault on identity’ (34), a refusal to let oneself be defined, classified and identified. We are not what they think, and the world is *not* what they claim.

What point is there then in continuing to say ‘we’? What can this royal ‘we’ in fact refer to? It cannot designate any great transcendental subject (Humanity, Woman, or the Proletariat). Defining the working class would mean reducing it to the status of an object of capital and stripping it of its subjectivity. The quest for a positive subject must thus be renounced: ‘Class, like the state, like money, like capital, must be understood as process. Capitalism is the ever renewed generation of class, the ever renewed class-ification of people.’ (35) The approach is hardly new (for those of us who have never looked for a substance in the concept of class struggle, but only for a relation). It is this process of ‘formation’, always begun anew and always incomplete, that E.P. Thompson brilliantly studied in his book on the English working class.

But Holloway goes further. While the working class can constitute a sociological notion, there does not for him exist any such thing as a revolutionary class. Our 'struggle is not to establish a new identity or composition, but to intensify anti-identity. The crisis of identity is a liberation' (36): it will free a plurality of forms of resistance and a multiplicity of screams. This multiplicity cannot be subordinated to the a priori unity of a mythical Proletariat; for from the standpoint of doing and acting we are this that and many other things as well, depending on the situation and the shifting conjuncture. Do all identifications, however fluid and variable, play an equivalent role in determining the terms and stakes of the struggle? Holloway fails to ask (himself) the question. Taking his distance from Negri's fetishism of the multitude, he expresses fear only when the unresolved strategic enigma breaks through: he worries that emphasising multiplicity while forgetting the underlying unity of the relationships of power can lead to a loss of political perspective, to the point that emancipation then becomes inconceivable. So, noted.

The spectre of anti-power

In order to get out of this impasse and solve the strategic enigma posed by the sphinx of capital, Holloway's last word is 'anti-power': 'This book is an exploration of the absurd and shadowy world of anti-power.'(37) He uses the distinction developed by Negri between 'power-to' (*potentia*) and 'power-over' (*potestas*) for his own purposes. The goal he advocates is to free power-to from power-over, doing from work, and subjectivity from objectification. If power-over sometimes comes 'out of the barrel of a gun', this he thinks is not the case with power-to. The very notion of anti-power still depends on power-over. Yet the struggle to liberate power-to is not the struggle to construct a counter-power, but rather an anti-power, something that is radically different from power-over. Concepts of revolution that focus on the taking of power are typically centred on the notion of counter-power.

Thus the revolutionary movement has too often been constructed 'as a mirror image of power, army against army, party against party'. Holloway defines anti-power by contrast as 'the dissolution of power-over' in the interest of 'the emancipation of power-to'. (38) What is Holloway's strategic conclusion (or anti-strategic conclusion, if strategy as well is too closely linked to power-over)? 'It should now be clear that power cannot be taken, for the simple reason that power is not possessed by any particular person or institution' but rather lies 'in the fragmentation of social relations' (39). Having reached this sublime height, Holloway contentedly contemplates the volume of dirty water being bailed out of the bathtub, but he worries about how many babies are being thrown out with it. The perspective of power to the oppressed has indeed given way to an indefinable, ungraspable anti-power, about which we are told only that it is everywhere and nowhere, like the centre of Pascale's circumference. Does the spectre of anti-power thus haunt the bewitched world of capitalist globalisation? It is on the contrary very much to be feared that the multiplication of 'anti's' (the anti-power of an anti-revolution made with an anti-strategy) might in the end be no more than a paltry rhetorical stratagem, whose ultimate

result is to disarm the oppressed (theoretically and practically) without for all that breaking the iron grasp of capital and its domination.

An imaginary Zapatismo

Philosophically, Holloway finds in Deleuze and Foucault's works a representation of power as a 'multiplicity of relationships of forces', rather than as a binary relationship. This ramified power can be distinguished from the state based on sovereign prerogatives and its apparatuses of domination. The approach is hardly a new one. As early as the 1970s, Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality Volume One* influenced certain critical reinterpretations of Marx. (40) Holloway's problematic, often close to Negri's, nonetheless diverges from it when he reproaches Negri with limiting himself to a radical democratic theory founded on the counterposition of constituent power to institutionalised power: a still binary logic of a clash of titans between the monolithic might of capital (Empire with a capital letter) and the monolithic might of the Multitude (also with a capital letter).

Holloway's main reference point is the Zapatista experience, whose theoretical spokesperson he appoints himself. His Zapatismo seems however to be imaginary, or even mythical, inasmuch as it takes hardly any account of the real contradictions of the political situation, the real difficulties and obstacles that the Zapatistas have encountered since the uprising of 1 January 1994. Limiting himself to the level of discourse, Holloway does not even try to identify the reasons for the Zapatistas' failure to develop an urban base.

The innovative character of Zapatista communications and thought are undeniable. In his lovely book *The Zapatista Spark* Jérôme Baschet analyses the Zapatistas' contributions with sensitivity and subtlety, without trying to deny their uncertainties and contradictions. (41) Holloway by contrast tends to take their rhetoric literally.

Limiting ourselves to the issues of power and counter-power, civil society and the vanguard, there can scarcely be any doubt that the Chiapas uprising of 1 January 1994 ('the moment when the critical forces were once more set in motion', says Baschet) should be seen as part of the renewal of resistance to neoliberal globalisation that has since become unmistakable, from Seattle to Genoa by way of Porto Alegre. This moment is also a strategic 'ground zero', a moment of critical reflection, stocktaking and questioning, in the aftermath of the 'short twentieth century' and the Cold War (presented by Marcos as a sort of third world war). In this particular transitional situation, the Zapatista spokespeople insist that 'Zapatismo does not exist' (Marcos) and that it has 'neither a line nor recipes'. They say they do not want to capture the state or even take power, but that they aspire to 'to something only a bit more difficult: a new world'. What we need to take is ourselves, Holloway translates. Yet the Zapatistas do reaffirm the necessity of a 'new revolution': there can be no change without a break. This is thus the hypothesis that Holloway has developed of a revolution without taking power. Looking at the Zapatistas' formulations more closely however, they are more complex and ambiguous than they first seem. One can see in them first of all a form of self-criticism of

the armed movements of the 1960s and '70s, of military verticalism, of the readiness to give orders to social movements, and of caudilloist deformations. At this level Marcos' texts and the EZLN communiqués mark a salutary turning point, renewing the hidden tradition of 'socialism from below' and popular self-emancipation.

The goal is not to take power for oneself (the party, army or vanguard) but rather to contribute to turning power over to the people, while emphasising the difference between the state apparatuses strictly speaking and relationships of power that are more deeply embedded in social relations (beginning with the social division of labour among individuals, between the sexes, between intellectual and manual workers, etc.). At a second, tactical level, the Zapatista discourse on power points to a discursive strategy. Conscious as they are that the conditions for overthrowing the central government and ruling class are far from being met on the scale of a country with a 3000-kilometre-long border with the American imperial giant, the Zapatistas choose not to want what they cannot achieve in any event. This is making a virtue of necessity so as to position themselves for a war of attrition and a lasting duality of power, at least on a regional scale.

At a third, strategic level, the Zapatista discourse comes down to denying the importance of the question of power in order simply to demand the organisation of civil society. This theoretical position reproduces for them the dichotomy between civil society (social movements) and political (particularly electoral) institutions. Civil society is in their eyes dedicated to acting as pressure (lobbying) groups on institutions that civil society is resigned to being unable to change.

Situated in not very favourable national, regional and international relationships of forces, the Zapatista discourse plays on all these different registers, while the Zapatistas' practice navigates skilfully among all the rocks. This is absolutely legitimate - as long as we do not take pronouncements that are founded on strategic calculations, while claiming to rise above them, too literally. The Zapatistas themselves know full well that they are playing for time; they can relativise the question of power in their communiqués, but they do know that the actually existing power of the Mexican bourgeoisie and army, and even the 'Northern colossus', will not fail to crush the indigenous rebellion in Chiapas if they get the chance, just as the US and Colombian state are now trying to crush the Colombian guerrillas. By painting a quasi-angelic picture of Zapatismo, at the cost of taking his distance from any concrete history or politics, Holloway is sustaining dangerous illusions. Not only does the Stalinist counter-revolution play no role in his balance sheet of the twentieth century, but also, in his work as in François Furet's, all history results from correct or incorrect ideas. He thus allows himself a balance sheet in which all the books are already closed, since in his eyes both experiences have failed, the reformist experience as well as the revolutionary. The verdict is to say the least hasty, wholesale (and crude), as if there existed only two symmetrical experiences, two competing and equally failed approaches; and as if the Stalinist regime (and its other avatars) resulted from the 'revolutionary experience' rather than the Thermidorian counter-revolution. This strange historic logic would make it just as possible to proclaim that the French Revolution has failed, the American Revolution has failed, etc. (42)

We will have to dare to go far beyond ideology and plunge into the depths of historical experience in order to pick up once more the thread of a strategic debate that has been buried under the sheer weight of accumulated defeats. On the threshold of a world that is in some ways wholly new to us, in which the new straddles the old, it is better to acknowledge what we do not know and stay open to new experiences to come than to theorise our powerlessness by minimising the obstacles that lie ahead.

Notes

1 Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. by Eden Paul [et al.], New York: Free Press, 1987.

2 See Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia*, London: Athlone, 1992.

3 See in particular Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000, and John Holloway, *Change the World without Taking Power*, London: Pluto Press, 2002 (Spanish translation: *Cambiar el Mundo sin Tomar el Poder*, Buenos Aires: Herramienta, 2002).

4 It is in fact striking in this respect to observe how much more respectful (and even ceremonious) and how much less critical this tendency is of its heritage than heterodox neo-Marxism is when it turns ‘back to Marx’.

5 See Daniel Bensaïd, *La Discordance des temps*, Paris: Editions de la Passion, 1995; *Résistances: Essai de Taupologie Générale*, Paris: Fayard, 2001; articles in *ContreTemps* no. 2 and the Italian journal *Erre* no. 1 (on the notion of the multitude); and finally a contribution that will be published by Verso in an English-language anthology.

6 Citations from John Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power*, London: Pluto Press, 2002, p. 8.

7 Holloway 2002, p. 164.

8 Holloway 2002, p. 19.

9 Holloway 2002, p. 73.

10 Holloway 2002, p. 94.

11 Holloway 2002, p. 96.

12 See the debates published in *ContreTemps* no. 3.

13 Holloway 2002, p. 210.

14 Holloway 2002, p. 54, quoting Marx 1966, p. 830.

15 Holloway 2002, p. 74.

16 Holloway 2002, p. 140.

17 Holloway 2002, p. 76.

18 Holloway 2002, p. 90.

19 Holloway 2002, p. 182.

20 Holloway hardly ventures at all to examine this Copernican revolution critically. Yet a quarter of a century later an evaluation is possible, if only to avoid repeating the same theoretical illusions and the same practical errors while dressing up the same discourse in new terminological clothes. See on this subject Maria Turchetto's contribution on 'the disconcerting trajectory of Italian autonomism' in *Dictionnaire Marx Contemporain*, Jacques Bidet and Eustache Kouvélakis eds., Paris: PUF, 2001; and Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism*, London: Pluto Press, 2002.

21 Jean-Marie Vincent, *Fétichisme et Société*, Paris: Anthropos, 1973.

22 Stavros Tombazos, *Les Temps du Capital*, Paris: Cahiers des Saisons, 1976; Alain Bihr, *La Reproduction du Capital* (2 vols.), Lausanne: Page 2, 2001.

23 Holloway 2002, p. 210.

24 Holloway 2002, p. 140.

25 V.I. Lenin, 'What Is to Be Done?: Burning Questions of Our Movement', in *Collected Works* vol. 5, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1961, pp. 384, 422; and see Daniel Bensaïd, 'Leaps! Leaps! Leaps!', in *International Socialism* no. 95, Summer 2002.

26 Holloway 2002, p. 139.

27 Holloway 2002, p. 20.

28 Holloway 2002, p. 215.

29 Holloway 2002, p. 214.

28 Holloway 2002, p. 215.

29 Holloway 2002, p. 214.

30 Holloway 2002, p. 215.

31 Holloway 2002, p. 64.

32 Holloway 2002, p. 100.

33 Holloway 2002, p. 102.

34 Holloway 2002, p. 106.

35 Holloway 2002, p. 142.

36 Holloway 2002, p. 212.

37 Holloway 2002, p. 38.

38 Holloway 2002, p. 37.

39 Holloway 2002, p. 72.

40 This was the case with many books including one of my own, with the significant title *La Révolution et le Pouvoir* ('The Revolution and Power', Paris: Stock, 1976), whose introductory note (which some comrades held against me) read, '*The first proletarian revolution gave its response to the problem of the state. Its degeneration has left us with the problem of power. The state must be destroyed and its machinery broken. Power must be pulled apart in its institutions and its underground anchorages. How can the struggle through which the proletariat constitutes itself as a ruling class contribute to this process, despite the apparent contradiction? We must once more take up the analysis of the crystallisations of power within capitalist society, trace their resurgence within the bureaucratic counter-revolution, and look in the struggle of the exploited classes for the tendencies that can enable the socialisation and withering away of power to win out over the statification of society.*' (7)

41 Jérôme Baschet, *L'Étincelle Zapatiste: Insurrection Indienne et Résistance Planétaire*, Paris: Denoël, 2002.

42 See Atilio Boron's article 'La Selva y la Polis', OSAL (Buenos Aires), June 2001, and Isidro Cruz Bernal's article in *Socialismo o Barbarie* (Buenos Aires), no. 11, May 2002. While expressing their sympathy and solidarity with the Zapatista resistance, they warn against the temptation to base a new model on it while masking its theoretical and strategic impasses.

"Drive your cart and your plough over the bones of the dead"

John Holloway

2005

John Holloway[1]:

"Drive your cart and your plough over the bones of the dead." [2]

That is my response to those [3] who criticise my book [4] for being anti-historical. This article is not a defence of the book: I can think of nothing more boring. We need to drive the argument forwards, not backwards. Books, like revolutions, cannot be defended: they go forward or they die.

I. Drive your Cart

Spit on history. History is the history of oppression told by the oppressors, a history from which oppression conveniently disappears, a history of Heroes, of Great Men.

Spit on history. History, even our history, is a history in which the struggle against oppression is invaded by the categories of the oppressors, so that it too becomes the history of Heroes, of Great Men, of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao.

Spit on history, because it is the great alibi of the Left, the great excuse for not thinking. Make any theoretical or political argument about revolution and the response of the Revolutionary Left is to bring you back to 1902, to 1905, to 1917, to 1921. History becomes a whirlpool, sucking you into the details of lives long dead. Present political differences become translated into disputes about the details of what happened in Kronstadt over eighty years ago. Anything to avoid thinking about the present, anything to avoid assuming the terrible responsibility that the future of the world depends on us and not on Lenin or Trotsky.

Spit on history, spit on Stalin (that is easy), but spit also on the concept of Stalinism. Stalinism is the greatest alibi, the greatest excuse for not thinking, for an important part of the revolutionary left. "Look at what happened in the Soviet Union, how the great Bolshevik Revolution led to tyranny and misery." "Yes", they reply, "Stalinism". History becomes a substitute for critical and self-critical thought. Between Bolshevik Revolution and Soviet tyranny a figure is introduced to relieve us revolutionaries from responsibility. If we have Stalin to blame, then we do not need to blame ourselves, we do not need to be critical or self-critical, we do not need to think. Above all, we do not need to think that perhaps there was something wrong with the Leninist project of conquering power. Stalin becomes a fig-leaf, protecting our innocence, hiding our nakedness.

Spit, then, on Stalinism. When people criticise my book for being anti-historical, what they mean in most cases (not all) is that, by not mentioning Stalin, the book takes away this fig-leaf, exposes our complicity. "Revolutions focussed on the taking of power have led to disaster, therefore we must rethink what revolution means" is what I argue. "No",

they reply, "it is true that these revolutions have led to disaster, but this was because of history, because of Stalinism; we do not need to rethink anything." This history, of course, is a peculiar history: it paints out of the picture those who said from the very beginning that the state-centred concept of revolution was flawed: not one of the critics mentions the name of Pannekoek.

Spit on history because there is nothing so reactionary as the cult of the past.[5] "The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living", says Marx. Revolutionary thought means shaking off that nightmare, waking up to our own responsibilities. Self-determination - communism, in other words, both as movement and as aim - is emancipation from the nightmare of tradition.

Spit on history because "an ideology of history has one purpose only: to prevent people from making history".[6]

II. Contre Temps

Revolution is the shooting of clocks, the breaking of time. [7]

The rule of value is the rule of duration. The breaking of duration is the pivot of revolutionary thought and action.

In capitalism, that which we make stands against us. Like Frankenstein's Creature, it stands outside us and denies the creative doing which gave it existence. "A commodity is in the first place an object outside us", as Marx says at the beginning of Capital.[8] As an object outside us, it stands against us, presents itself as having an existence of its own, a duration independent of our doing. Capitalism is the rule of things that we have made and which deny their origin and continuing dependence on our doing.

We live in a world of Monsters of our own creation which have turned against us. They stand there, apparently independent of us, oppressing us: Commodity, Money, Capital, State and so on. They were there yesterday, they were there a hundred years ago, two hundred years ago. It seems certain that they will be there tomorrow. They are oppressing us, dehumanising us, killing us. How can we free ourselves, how can we get rid of them? They have been there for so long, their existence seems everlasting. How can we possibly escape?

"Wake up," says Papa Marx, "it's just a nightmare. These Monsters are an illusion." We wake up and the Monsters are gone, we see that they were not everlasting, their duration is dissolved.

But no. It is not as simple as that. Maybe our vision of Marx was just a dream, because when we open our eyes the Monsters are still there, and more aggressive than ever, attacking Iraq, closing factories, reforming universities in their own image, subordinating every aspect of our lives to their domination, turning us into little monsters ourselves, so that we run around worshipping Commodity, Money, Capital and State.

The nightmare continues. Yet Marx was right, it is a nightmare, and the Monsters are illusions. But they are not mere illusions, they are real illusions. They are what Marx calls "fetishes". But what is a real illusion? On that hangs the meaning of revolution.

The Monsters seem everlasting. How do we break their duration?

If we take the Monsters as what they appear to be, as creatures independent of ourselves, then the only possibility of defeating them is by matching our strength against theirs, our power against theirs.

That is not Marx's approach. Marx says "The Monsters are not what they appear to be. We must criticise them. The Monsters exist because we made them." "I beg your pardon", we say, "can you say that again please?" And Marx replies "The Monsters are not what they appear to be. We must criticise them. The Monsters exist because we make them." "But that is not what you said the first time", we say, "the first time you said "made", the second time you said "make". Which do you mean?" But Marx does not reply - he has been dead for over a hundred years. We are left to assume our own responsibility.

Commodity, money, capital, the state: all these are own creations. That is the core of Marx's method, the centre of his argument in *Capital*.^[9] We create the monsters which oppress us. But, even taking this as a starting point, there is still a huge question. When we create these fetishes (these social relations that exist as things), are we like Dr. Frankenstein creating a monster that acquires an existence independent from us? Or are we creating fetishes that only appear to acquire an independent existence, but which depend for their existence on our constant re-creation? Does capital exist because we created it, or does it exist because we constantly recreate it?^[10] In the former case, revolution means destroying the monster that we have created. In the second case, revolution means ceasing to create the monster. The implications of this distinction for how we think about revolution and revolutionary organisation are probably enormous.

Capital exists because we create it. We created it yesterday (and every day for the last two hundred years or so). If we do not create it tomorrow, it will cease to exist. Its existence depends on the constant repetition of the process of exploitation (and of all the social processes that make exploitation possible). It is not like Frankenstein's creature. It does not have an existence independent of our doing. It does not have a duration, a durable independent existence. It only appears to have a duration. The same is true of all the derivative forms of capital (state, money, etc.). The continuity of these monsters (these forms of social relations) is not something that exists independent of us: their continuity is a continuity that is constantly generated and re-generated by our doing. The fact that we have reasons for generating capital does not alter the fact that capital depends for its existence from one day to the next, from one moment to the next, on our act of creation. Capital depends upon us: that is the ray of hope in a world that seems so black.

With this, the clock explodes. If capital's existence depends on our creation of it, it becomes clear that revolution is the breaking of that repeated act of creation. Revolution is the breaking of continuity, the rupture of duration, the transformation of time. The clock has tick-tick-ticked for two hundred years, telling the monstrous lie on which

capitalism depends, the lie that says that one moment is the same as the last: it must tick no more. Capitalism is the establishment of continuity, of duration, of tradition, the projection of the present moment into the next, and the next, and the next. Revolution is not progress, or planning or the fulfilment of tradition or the culmination of history: it is the opposite of all that. It is the breaking of tradition, the discarding of history (its dismissal to the realm of pre-history), the smashing of the clock and the concentration of time into a moment of unbearable intensity. Communism is not five-year plans but self-determination, and self-determination is an absolute present in which no nightmare of tradition weighs upon us, in which there are no monsters. That is why Benjamin insists on the *Jetztzeit* (the now-moment) as the key to revolution[11], why Bloch sees communism as the pursuit of the *Nunc Stans*, the moment of perfect intensity,[12] why Vaneigem says that the task is to subvert history with the watchword "Act as though there were no tomorrow"[13].

Continuities existed perhaps in the past: once we project them into the future, we render revolution conceptually impossible, we defeat ourselves. Periodisation of the present is always reactionary, whether we categorise the present in terms of a long wave, or a mode of regulation, or a paradigm. Revolution depends on the opening up of every moment, so that our continued production of our own repression (if that should happen) is a matter of amazement, never, never, never to be taken for granted.

Understanding that capital depends on us for its existence from one moment to another takes us into a whole new world of perception, a whole new grammar[14], a new rhythm.[15] It seems that we are crazy, that we are entering an enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world. But of course it is not so: the world we are criticising, the world of capital, the world of duration, the world of identity, is the "enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world" (Marx 1972, 830). We are so used to this perverted world that to try to think the world from the starting point of our own doing seems insane. But we must plunge into this insanity, put our own doing in its proper place as the true sun:[16] that is our struggle.

When I say that capital depends for its existence from one moment to the next on our creation, I do not mean that getting rid of capitalism is a simple act of volition or choice. Capital is a real illusion, not a mere illusion: its independence from us is an illusion, but it is an illusion really generated by our alienated labour, by the fracturing of our social doing. The understanding that capital is produced by us, and depends for its existence from one day to the next on our production of it, does not mean that we cease to produce it. It does, however, bring us to reformulate the question of revolution, to ask how we can stop producing the domination that is destroying us. How do we break continuity, not just the continuity of their domination, but the continuity of our production of their domination? How do we break not just their tradition but our tradition as well?

Break history. *Du passé faisons table rase.*[17]

III. Drive your Plough

Drive your cart and your plough over the bones of the dead. Yes. First your cart: show disrespect for the dead, for they have bequeathed us a world unworthy of humanity, a world of exploitation and of mass murder in the name of democracy.

And then your plough: plough the bones of the dead into the soil of revolt. Plough their legacy of struggle into the ground to make it fertile. Honour the dead by showing them disrespect.

Do not build mausoleums, or monuments, or even put gravestones for the dead, just use their bones directly as fertiliser. The disappeared are the great heroes of communism: not just those who have been disappeared by state repression,[18] but all of those unseen, unheard people who struggled to live with dignity in a world which negates dignity, the knitters of humanity. The history we need is not so much that of the great revolutionaries, but of those who did their washing and played with their children.

The history of the invisible is a negative history, the movement of the scream of (and for) that which is not yet (the communism which is not yet, which might or might not be one day, but which exists now as movement, as longing, as not yet, as negativity). The history of the scream is not the history of a Movement, or an Institution, or of Marx-Engels-Lenin-Trotsky. And it is not a continuous history but a history of leaps and bounds and breaks and the constant search for rupture. It is, as Bloch puts it, a "hard, endangered journey, a suffering, a wandering, a going astray, a searching for the hidden homeland, full of tragic interruption, boiling, bursting with leaps, eruptions, lonely promises, discontinuously laden with the consciousness of light".[19] A history in which people break their heads against duration, a history in which time itself is always at issue.

A history of broken connections, of unresolved longings, of unanswered questions. When we turn to history, it is not to find answers, but to pick up the questions bequeathed to us by the dead. To answer these questions, the only resource we have is ourselves, our thought and our practice, now, in the present. History opens questions that lead us on to theoretical reflection.

IV. Appendix: Criticising the Critics

The aim of this article has been to develop some ideas prompted by those who have criticised my book for not developing a more historical approach to the question of revolution. I do not particularly want to defend my book.[20] Perhaps the critics are right, yet I think they are wrong.

They are wrong because the history that they ask for is presented as something unproblematic. To say "there is not enough history" is rather like saying "there is not enough social science": it is meaningless, because it assumes that the categories of historical discussion are clear. It takes "history" for granted, as though there were some categorically neutral history which absolved us from the need for theoretical reflection. Vega Cantor complains of the absence of "real history": but what is this "real history" - a

history of kings and queens, of working class heroes? A history of class struggle, presumably, but how do we understand class struggle? As the movement of capital's dependence upon labour and upon the conversion of doing into labour? That is what I try to do in chapter 10 of the book, but it is difficult to even attempt to do it without a prior theoretical discussion.

The central issue is perhaps the relation between historical analysis and theoretical reflection. For me, historical analysis opens up questions, pushes us to think about those questions. Thus, the history of revolutions in the twentieth century does not demonstrate that revolutions focussed on the taking of power are doomed to failure: it suggests that there is something fundamentally wrong with the power-centred concept of revolution and that therefore we have to rethink the notion of revolution. The core of the argument is not historical but theoretical: reflection on the past thrusts us towards our own responsibility to think.

For the critics, however, history is a world not of unanswered questions but of explanations. As a result, they understand my argument as saying that history shows that power-centred revolution cannot succeed, and respond that history does not show that. Instead of seeing historical analysis leading to theoretical reflection, they push theory aside and look to history for the answers. Theoretical reflection is not important: the answers are to be found in history, they claim. Thus Bensaid: "Il faudra bien oser aller au-delà de l'idéologie, plonger dans les profondeurs de l'expérience historique, pour renouer les fils d'un débat stratégique enseveli sous le poids des défaites accumulées."

The accusation of anti-historicism (Almeyra) by these authors goes hand in hand with a dismissal of theoretical reflection. Above all, do not ask us to think: the answers are to be found in the past. Thus: "Holloway, porque mira las cosas desde el cielo de la abstracción teórica, no ve la concreción política e histórica de la lucha de clases" (Almeyra). And do not ask us to think about what Marx said, that is much too extreme: "Holloway espouses an extreme form of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism" (Callinicos). Marx is not entirely dismissed (after all, we are all Marxists, aren't we?), just shunted off into an irrelevant corner. The concept of fetishism is recognised (after all, Marx did speak of that), but then dismissed as unimportant: after all, so many people have spoken of it before, so there is nothing new there (Bensaid). And above all, why do I approach the question of revolution theoretically, when theory has nothing at all to do with politics? That is my great mistake, according to Ernesto Manzana, who claims to take from Callinicos the insight that it is a "fundamental error" to "mix questions of politics with epistemological questions". A whole chorus of voices saying "No, please, please do not ask us to think, We have all the answers, the answers are in history, Stalinism is the explanation for the failure of past revolutions. But above all, please do not ask us to think about the meaning of revolution!"

But there is something else behind the critics' insistence on the importance of history. History, says Vega Cantor, "debe ser un punto esencial en la reconstrucción de cualquier proyecto anticapitalista que no puede, ni debe, partir de cero, pues hay toda una experiencia y una memoria históricas acumuladas". That is perhaps the core of the critics' arguments: there is an accumulation of experience of struggle, of lessons learned, of wisdom won, of forms of organisation developed.

Yet I think not. Capital accumulates. It piles surplus-value upon surplus value, growing in quantity, getting bigger and bigger. Struggle against capital does not accumulate. Or perhaps it does accumulate, but then it ceases to be struggle. The accumulation of struggle is the position of the Communist Parties in 1968 who said "that is not the way to make revolution, learn from our experience". The accumulation of struggle is the (now) grey-beards of 1968 telling the protestors of today "that is not the way to make revolution, learn from our experience". The accumulation of struggle is an incremental view of revolution: "we won 1.6% of the vote in the last election, after the next we may have a few deputies, in twenty years" time we could well have thirty."

The movement of accumulation is a positive movement. But our movement, the movement against capitalism is and must be a negative movement: a movement not only against capital, but against all our own practices and routines and traditions which reproduce capital. The accumulation of struggle is the accumulation of tradition, of continuity, but it is not by tradition and continuity that we will break with capitalism. Think scream, think rupture, think break. "Yes, of course", say the wise heads of tradition, "we have many years of thinking of these issues, let me explain to you what happened in 1905, and 1917, and 1921, and ...". But we have already fallen asleep. "Revolution now!" we say. "Ah yes", they reply, "but first we must build the party, and be ready for the appropriate point in the next long wave". But we are already dead. We and all humanity.

No, there is no accumulation of struggle. Of memories and self-justifications and identities, perhaps. Communism is not a movement of accumulation, but of negation, of leaps and bounds and breaks. Rupture, not continuity, is the centre of revolutionary thought. Rupture, not continuity, is the centre of revolutionary practice.

The new wave of struggle makes new music, a new rhythm, a new grammar. Using History as a pretext, you would pour new struggles into old methods. Do not do it. Those methods have failed. Whatever the excuses you may find for their failure, their time has passed. Do not rub our faces in the mire of the past. Let the new forms of struggle flourish. Let us drive our cart and our plough over the bones of the dead.

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Notes

[1] My thanks to Alberto Bonnet, Eloína Peláez, Lars Stubbe and Sergio Tischler for their comments on an earlier draft.

[2] William Blake, "Proverbs of Hell", in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: Blake* (1988) 35.

[3] I have in mind particularly the critiques by Daniel Bensaid, Renan Vega Cantor, Guillermo Almeyra, Aldo Romero, Ernesto Manzana and Isidoro Cruz Bernal. I leave aside the thoughtful critique by Armando Bartra, which also raises the question of history, for separate consideration. For the full discussion surrounding the book, see <http://www.herramienta.com.ar/index.php> It goes without saying that I am immensely grateful to all those who have responded to the book's invitation to discuss the issue.

[4] *Change the World without taking Power: the Meaning of Revolution Today*, Pluto, London, 2002. French edition: Syllepse, Paris, September 2003.

[5] See Vaneigem (1994) 116: "In collective as well as in individual history, the cult of the past and the cult of the future are equally reactionary. Everything which has to be built has to be built in the present."

[6] Vaneigem (1994) 231.

[7] Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (Thesis XV) reports that in the July revolution "on the first evening of fighting it turned out that the clocks in towers were being fired on simultaneously and independently from several places in Paris". Benjamin (1973) 262.

[8] Marx (1965), 35.

[9] Much "Marxist" discussion is in fact pre-critical and in that sense pre-Marxist.

[10] See the story by Borges of a man who dreams another man into existence:

[11] See Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Theses XIV and XVIII: Benjamin (1973) 261, 263.

[12] See Bloch (1964), (1986).

[13] Vaneigem 116, 232.

[14] This is the meeting place of autonomism and critical theory. The "Copernican inversion" of autonomism or operaismo depends for its full force on understanding that its insight takes us into a different world of reasoning (explored most fully in the tradition of critical theory). Similarly, for critical theory to escape from its chronic pessimism, it must see that demystifying the enchanted, topsy-turvy world of capitalism means seeing doing as the driving force of society. See the helpful discussion of the book by Wildcat (2002).

[15] Hardt and Negri (2000) do not see this point at all. Just the contrary: they insist on dragging the insight into capital's dependence upon labour back into an old world of paradigms.

[16] Marx, *Introduction to the Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law: Marx and Engels* (1975) 176.

[17] "L'Internationale" (Eugène Pottier)

[18] See the declaration of HIJOS (the organisation set up by children of the disappeared in Argentina): "Nosotros debemos crear y reinventar un camino propio, que retome la senda que ellos marcaron y que se desvie cuando sea necesario. Como hicieron ellos, con las generaciones que los precedieron, para superarlos, para ser mejores, para aportar en serio y concretamente al cambio con el que soñaron y soñamos. Para que no se nos vaya la vida repitiendo esquemas que suenan muy contundentes, pero que no le mueven un pelo a los dueños del poder.": Zibechi (2003), in press.

[19] Bloch 1964, Vol. 2, p. 29.

[20] I do not want to defend the book, but I have a special request to Daniel Bensaid: before discussing further, please read the book again. There are so many misrepresentations (or misunderstandings) of the book in your critique that it is difficult to take it as a foundation for discussion.

* *From Herramienta website:*

<http://www.herramienta.com.ar/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=169>

Screams and spit

(Twelve Comments Plus One More, to Continue the Debate with John Holloway)

Daniel Bensaïd

(i) ‘Spit on history’, John Holloway retorts. (1) Why not? But on which history? For him, apparently, there is only one history, a one-way history, the history of oppression that even contaminates the struggle of the oppressed. As if history and memory were not themselves battlefields. As if a history of the oppressed - often an oral history (history of the exploited, women’s history, gay history, the history of colonised peoples) - did not also exist, just as we can conceive of a theatre of the oppressed or a politics of the oppressed.

(ii) For Holloway, history is ‘the great excuse for not thinking’. Does he mean that it is impossible to think historically? And, then, what do we mean by ‘thinking’? - An old question, that, always getting in the way.

(iii) Spit ‘also on the concept of Stalinism’, which absolves us of the ‘need to blame ourselves’ and constitutes a convenient ‘fig-leaf, protecting our innocence’. No one today imagines that the revolution of the 1920s, luminous and immaculate, can be counterposed to the dark 1930s on which we can dump every sin. No one has emerged unscathed from the ‘century of extremes’. Everyone needs methodically to examine their conscience, including us. But is this sufficient reason to erase the discontinuities that Michel Foucault was so fond of? To establish a strict genealogical continuity between the revolutionary event and the bureaucratic counter-revolution? To pronounce an evenly balanced verdict of ‘guilty’ on both the victors and vanquished, the executioners and their victims? This is not a moral question but a political one. It determines whether it is possible to ‘continue’ or ‘begin anew’. The darkness of non-history, in which all cats are grey (without, for all, that catching the tiniest mouse) is the preferred landscape for neoliberals and repentant Stalinists to hold their reunions, hurriedly wiping out the traces of their past without thinking about this past that makes it so hard for them to pass.

(iv) ‘Spit on history because there is nothing so reactionary as the cult of the past’; So be it. But who is talking about a cult? Does tradition weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living? Definitely. But what tradition? Where does this tradition in the singular come from, in which so many contrary traditions vanish away? By contrast, Walter Benjamin, whom Holloway cites so eagerly (appositely or not), demands that we rescue tradition from the conformism that always threatens it. This distinction is essential.

(v) ‘Break history. Du passé faisons table rase’. (2) The song rings out proudly. But the politics of the blank page (which Chairman Mao was so fond of) and the blank slate evokes some rather disquieting precedents. Its most consistent advocate was none other than a certain Pol Pot. Gilles Deleuze speaks more wisely when he says, ‘We always begin again from the middle.’

(vi) ‘Spit on history’? Nietzsche himself, certainly the most virulent critic of historical reason and the myth of progress, was subtler. (3) He did, admittedly, recommend learning

to forget in order to be able to act. He took exception to any history that would be 'a kind of conclusion to living and a final reckoning for humanity'. But, while he implacably denounced 'monumental history', 'antiquarian history', 'excess of historical culture' and the 'supersaturation of an age in history', and history as such as 'a disguised theology', he maintained, nonetheless, that 'living requires the services of history': 'To be sure, we need history. But we need it in a manner different from the way in which the spoilt idler in the garden of knowledge uses it . . . for life and action, not for a comfortable turning away from life and action . . .'. Nietzsche thus defended the necessity of a 'critical history'. At least he claimed to counter 'the effects of history', not with a politics of emancipation, but, rather, with an aesthetic: the 'powers of art, or the "super-historical" . . . powers which divert the gaze from what is developing back . . . to art and religion'. Myth against history?

(vii) 'We live in a world of Monsters of our own creation'. While commodities, money, capital and the state are fetishes, they are not 'mere illusions, they are real illusions'. Exactly. What follows from this, in practical terms? That abolishing these illusions requires abolishing the social relations that make them necessary and fabricate them? Or, as Holloway suggests, that we must be content with a fetish strike: 'Capital exists because we create it. . . . If we do not create it tomorrow, it will cease to exist'? In the aftermath of 1968, there were Maoists who claimed that 'driving out the cop' in our heads would be enough to get rid of the real cops too. Yet the real cops are still with us (more than ever), and the tyranny of the ego is still secure even in the best regulated minds. So would refusing to create capital suffice to lift its spells? Magical behaviour (conjuring away in our imaginations an imaginary despot) would only bring about a liberation which is just as imaginary. Abolishing the conditions of fetishism in reality means overthrowing the despotism of the market and the power of private property and breaking the state that ensures the conditions of social reproduction.

(viii) No doubt, this is all an old story. But where are the new stories? The new must always be made (at least in part) with the bricks of the old. Holloway defines the revolution as 'the breaking of tradition, the discarding of history . . . the smashing of the clock and the concentration of time into a moment of unbearable intensity'. Here, he is recycling the imagery that Benjamin used in describing the rebels in 1830 who fired on the faces of public clocks. The symbolic destruction of the image of time still confuses the fetish of temporality with the social relationship on which it rests: the 'wretched' measurement of abstract labour time.

(ix) Holloway blots out with his spit the criticisms that Atilio Boron, Alex Callinicos, Guillermo Almeyra and I have made of his work. He reproaches us with envisaging history as 'something unproblematic', instead of opening it up to theoretical questions. This is a gratuitous accusation, backed up neither with arguments nor with serious evidence. All of us have, on the contrary, devoted much of our work to interrogating, revising, deconstructing and reconstructing our historical worldview. (4) History is like power; you cannot ignore it. You can refuse to take power, but then it will take you. You can throw history out the door, but it will kick over the traces and come back in through the window.

(x) There is ‘something fundamentally wrong with the power-centred concept of revolution’. But what? Foucault passed this way a long time ago. As I have already mentioned, more than twenty-five years ago I wrote a book entitled *La Révolution et le Pouvoir* (‘The Revolution and Power’), around the idea that the state can be broken but the ‘relations of power’ must still be undone (or deconstructed). This is not a new issue. It reached us by way of libertarian traditions and May ’68, among others. Why, if not out of ignorance, does Holloway make a show of radically innovating (still making a clean sweep) instead of situating himself in discussions that have . . . a (long) history!

(xi) ‘The accumulation of struggle is an incremental view of revolution’, says Holloway. It is a positive movement, whereas the anticapitalist movement ‘must be a negative movement’. Criticising illusions of progress, the stockbroker spirit, Penelopes weaving their electoral skeins (stitch by stitch, link by link), interest piled on interest, and the ineluctable march of history as it triumphs over regrettable skids, detours and delays - all this criticism itself belongs to an old tradition (represented in France by Georges Sorel and Charles Péguy, who had so much influence on Benjamin). But, just the same, is the absolute interruption of a scream without a past or a sequel enough to outweigh the continuities of historical time? Benjamin takes exception to the homogenous, empty time of the mechanics of progress, and with it to the notion of an evanescent present, a simple, evanescent hyphen, absolutely determined by the past and irresistibly aspiring to a predestined future. In Benjamin’s work, by contrast, the present becomes the central category of a strategic temporality: each present is thus invested with a feeble messianic power of reshuffling the cards of past and future, giving the vanquished of yesterday and forever their chance, and rescuing tradition from conformism. (5) Yet, for all that, this present is not detached from historical time. As in Blanqui’s work, it maintains relations with past events, not relations of causality, but, rather, relations of astral attraction and constellation. It is in this sense that, to use Benjamin’s definitive formulation, from now on, politics trumps history.

(xii) ‘Using History as a pretext’, Holloway says, we want to ‘pour new struggles into old methods’: ‘Let the new forms of struggle flourish.’ Just because we are constantly welcoming a portion of newness, history (!) exists rather than some divine or mercantile eternity. But the historical dialectic of old and new is subtler than any binary or Manichean opposition between old and new, including in the methodological sense. Yes, let the new flourish; do not give in to routine and habit; stay open to surprise and astonishment. This is all useful advice. But how, by what standard, can we evaluate the new if we lose all memory of the old? Novelty, like antiquity, is always a relative notion.

Screaming and spitting do not amount to thinking. Still less to doing politics.

Notes

1 Quotes from Holloway 2004.

2 In French in Holloway’s text: ‘Make a clean sweep of the past’ [translator’s note].

3 Quotes from Nietzsche 2004.

4 See, for example, Bensaïd 2002b, and Callinicos 1995 and 2004.

5 On Benjamin, see Bensaïd 1990.

The following are the references for both Daniel Bensaïd's critique of Holloway's book and his reply to Holloway's reply:

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A Critical Review of John Holloway's Book: To change the World Without Taking Power?

Phil Hearse

2003

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

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 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 20th 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 channelled 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 centred. 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-sequitur*. 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 'initiated' 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 misled) 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 Subcommandante Marcos. This is the leadership of a political organisation, which is in effect an ersatz political party, the denials of the Subcommandante 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 Subcommandante 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, i.e. 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 Pannekoek 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 shorthand 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.

Notes:

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.

10. op. cit., p. 118.

11. These questions are discussed in depth in Daniel Bensaïd’s book, *Marx l’intempestif*, (Fayard 1995).

12. op. cit., p. 122.

* Published on "Socialist Resistance" website.

Power and the State

John Holloway

16 October 2004

This is the written version of Holloway's speech in the debate on 'Strategies for Social Transformation', at the European Social Forum, London, October 16, 2004. The other speakers were Phil Hearse, Fausto Bertinotti and Hilary Wainwright.

1. I assume that we are here because we agree on two basic points. Firstly, capitalism is a disaster for humanity and we urgently need a radical social change, a revolution. Secondly, we do not know how such a change can take place. We have ideas, but no certainties. That is why it is important to discuss, respecting our differences and understanding that we are all part of the same movement.

2. In this discussion, we start from where we are, from a confused movement, a cacophony of rebellions, loosely united in this Social Forum. The question is how we should continue. Should we organise as a party? Should we focus our struggles on the state and in winning influence within the state or conquering state power? Or should we turn our back on the state in so far as we can and get on with constructing an alternative? I want to argue that we should turn our back on the state in so far as possible.

3. This is a question of how we organise and where we think we are going. The state is a form of organisation, a way of doing things. The state is an organisation separate from the rest of society. The people who work in the state (the politicians and the functionaries or civil servants) work on behalf of society, for the benefit of society, as they see it. Some are better than others (I have no doubt that Bertinotti is better than Berlusconi), but all work on our behalf, in our name. In other words, they exclude us. The state, as an organisational form, is a way of excluding us, of negating the possibility of self-determination. Once we are excluded, we have no real control over what they do. Representative democracy reinforces and legitimates our exclusion, it does not give us control over what the state does. Many of the worst atrocities are justified in the name of democracy.

If we focus our struggles on the state, we have to understand that the state pulls us in a certain direction. Above all, it seeks to impose upon us a separation of our struggles from society, to convert our struggle into a struggle on behalf of, in the name of. It separates leaders from the masses, the representatives from the represented, it draws us into a different way of talking, a different way of thinking. It pulls us into a process of reconciliation with reality, and that reality is the reality of capitalism, a form of social organisation that is based on exploitation and injustice, on killing and destruction. There is one key concept in the history of the state-centred left, and that concept is betrayal. Time and time again, the leaders have betrayed the movement, and not necessarily because they are bad people, but just because the state as a form of organisation separates the leaders from the movement and draws them into a process of reconciliation with capital. Betrayal is already given in the state as an organisational form.

Can we resist this? Yes, of course we can, and it is something that happens all the time. We can refuse to let the state identify leaders or permanent representatives of the movement, we can refuse to let delegates negotiate in secret with the representatives of the state. But this means understanding that our forms of organisation are very different from those of the state, that there is no symmetry between them. The state is an organisation on behalf of, what we want is the organisation of self-determination, a form of organisation that allows us to articulate what we want, what we decide, what we consider necessary or desirable - a council or communal organisation, a commun-ism. There are no models for how we should organise our drive towards self-determination. It is always a matter of invention and experimentation. What is clear is that the state as a form of organisation pushes in the opposite direction, against self-determination. The two forms of organisation are incompatible.

When I say “state”, I include parties or any organisation that has the state as its main focus. The party, as a form of organisation, reproduces the state form: it excludes, it creates distinctions between leaders and masses, representatives and represented; in order to win state power, it adopts the agenda and the temporalities of the state. In other words, it goes against the drive towards social self-determination which I think is the core of our struggle. Note that I am saying to Fausto and to Daniel and to Hilary “I don’t think the party is the right way to organise”. I am not saying “I don’t like you” or “I will not cooperate with you”, nor am I saying that struggles that take another route (such as the case of Venezuela) are therefore to be condemned. I am simply saying that in thinking of the way forward, party organisation or focussing on state power is the wrong way to go, because it implies a form of organisation that excludes and imposes hierarchies, that weakens and bureaucratises the anarchic effervescence of the drive towards self-determination that is the core of the current movement against neo-liberal capitalism.

4. What does it mean to turn our back on the state? In some cases, it means ignoring the state completely, not making any demands on the state, just getting on with the construction of our own alternatives. The most obvious example of that at the moment would be the Zapatistas’ shift in direction last year, their creation of the Juntas de Buen Gobierno, the creation of their own regional administration in a way that seeks to avoid the separation of administration and society typical of the state.

In other cases, it is difficult to turn our back on the state completely, because we need its resources in order to live - as teachers, as students, as unemployed, whatever. It is very difficult for most of us to avoid all contact with the state. In that case, what is important is to understand that the state is a form of organisation that pulls us in certain directions, that pulls us towards a reconciliation with capitalism, and to think how we can shape our contact with the state, how we can move against-and-beyond the state as a form of doing things, refusing to accept the creation of hierarchies, the fragmentation of our struggles that contact with the state implies, refusing to accept the language and the logic and perhaps above all the temporality of the state, the times and rhythms that the state tries to impose on us. How do we engage with the state without slotting in to its logic, without reproducing its logic inside our own movement? This is always a difficult issue in practice, in which it is very easy to get drawn into the logic of achieving particular concrete aims and forget the impact on the dynamic of the movement as a whole. I do not

think it is a question of reclaiming the state, although I have a lot of respect for many of the struggles that are covered in Hilary's book, but I think the idea of reclaiming the state is wrong: the state is an alien form of organisation - it is not, and cannot be, ours.

5. In all this the question of time and how we think about time is crucial. On the one hand the state imposes its temporality on us all the time, with its rhythm of elections and its changes of regime which change little or nothing: "Wait till the next election and then you can change things; if you want to do something now, then prepare for the next election, build the party". On the other hand, the Leninist revolutionary tradition also tells us to wait: "Wait for the next revolutionary occasion or the next downturn of the long wave, wait until we take power and then we shall change society; in the meantime, build the party".

But we know that we cannot wait. Capitalism is destroying the world and destroying us at such a rate that we cannot wait. We cannot wait for the election and we cannot wait for the revolution, we cannot wait until we win state power in one way or another, we have to try and break the destructive dynamic now. We have to refuse. Capitalism does not exist because the evil ones, the Bushes and Blairs and Berlusconi, create it. Capitalism does not exist because it was created a hundred or two hundred years ago. Capitalism exists today only because we created it today. If we do not create capitalism tomorrow, then it will not exist tomorrow. Capitalism exists because we make it, and we have to stop making it, to refuse. This means breaking time, breaking continuity, understanding that something does not exist today just because it existed yesterday: it exists only if we make it.

In thinking about alternatives to the state, I think refusal has to be the pivot, the key. But it is not enough. To maintain our refusal to make capitalism, we have to have an alternative way of surviving. The refusal has to be accompanied by the creation of a different world, the creation of a new commons, the creation of a different way of doing things. Behind the absolute here-and-now of refusal there has to be another temporality, a patient construction of a different world. There is no model for this. The only model is the multiplicity of experiences and inventions of the movement of resistance against capitalism. This multiplicity, this cacophony of struggles and experiences should be respected, not channelled into a party, not focussed on the winning of state power. The problem is not to take power, but to construct our own power, our own power to do things differently, our own power to create a different world.

Response to John Holloway

Change the World by Transforming Power - Including State Power!

Hilary Wainwright

16 October 2004

This is the written version of Wainwright's speech in the debate on 'Strategies for Social Transformation', at the European Social Forum, London, October 16, 2004. The other speakers were John Holloway, Fausto Bertinotti and Phil Hearse.

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 SPD, 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.

Hilary Wainwright is editor of Red Pepper (Britain), where this transcript was first published.

Take the Power to Change the World

Phil Hearse

16 October 2004

This is the written version of Hearse's speech in the debate on 'Strategies for Social Transformation', at the European Social Forum, London, October 16, 2004. The other speakers were John Holloway, Fausto Bertinotti and Hilary Wainwright.

Subcommandante Marcos focused 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, then they will have created what is the slogan of the whole of the militant Mexican left - "Un gobierno obrero, 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 immigration 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*.

* *Phil Hearse is an editor of Socialist Resistance (Britain)*.

A debate between John Holloway and Alex Callinicos
“Can we change the world without taking power?”
World Social Forum, Porto Alegre
27 January 2005

John Holloway:

I don't know the answer. Perhaps we can change the world without taking power. Perhaps we cannot. The starting point-for all of us, I think, is uncertainty, not knowing, a common search for a way forward. Because it becomes more and more clear that capitalism is a catastrophe for humanity. A radical change in the organisation of society, that is, revolution, is more urgent than ever. And this revolution can only be world revolution if it is to be effective.

But it is unlikely that world revolution can be achieved in one single blow. This means that the only way in which we can conceive of revolution is as interstitial revolution, as a revolution that takes place in the interstices of capitalism, a revolution that occupies spaces in the world while capitalism still exists. The question is how we conceive of these interstices, whether we think of them as states or in other ways.

In thinking about this, we have to start from where we are, from the many rebellions and insubordinations that have brought us to Porto Alegre. The world is full of such rebellions, of people saying NO to capitalism: NO, we shall not live our lives according to the dictates of capitalism, we shall do what we consider necessary or desirable and not what capital tells us to do. Sometimes we just see capitalism as an all-encompassing system of domination and forget that such rebellions exist everywhere. At times they are so small that even those involved do not perceive them as refusals, but often they are collective projects searching for an alternative way forward and sometimes they are as big as the Lacandon Jungle or the Argentinazo of three years ago or the revolt in Bolivia just over a year ago. All of these insubordinations are characterised by a drive towards self-determination, an impulse that says, ‘No, you will not tell us what to do, we shall decide for ourselves what we must do.’

These refusals can be seen as fissures, as cracks in the system of capitalist domination. Capitalism is not (in the first place) an economic system, but a system of command. Capitalists, through money, command us, telling us what to do. To refuse to obey is to break the command of capital. The question for us, then, is how do we multiply and expand these refusals, these cracks in the texture of domination?

There are two ways of thinking about this.

The first says that these movements, these many insubordinations, lack maturity and effectiveness unless they are focused, unless they are channelled towards a goal. For them to be effective, they must be channelled towards the conquest of state power-either through elections or through the overthrowing of the existing state and the establishment

of a new, revolutionary state. The organisational form for channelling all these insubordinations towards that aim is the party.

The question of taking state power is not so much a question of future intentions as of present organisation. How should we organise ourselves in the present? Should we join a party, an organisational form that focuses our discontent on the winning of state power? Or should we organise in some other way?

The second way of thinking about the expansion and multiplication of insubordinations is to say, 'No, they should not be all harnessed together in the form of a party, they should flourish freely, go whatever way the struggle takes them.' This does not mean that there should be no coordination, but it should be a much looser coordination. Above all, the principal point of reference is not the state but the society that we want to create.

The principal argument against the first conception is that it leads us in the wrong direction. The state is not a thing, it is not a neutral object: it is a form of social relations, a form of organisation, a way of doing things which has been developed over several centuries for the purpose of maintaining or developing the rule of capital. If we focus our struggles on the state, or if we take the state as our principal point of reference, we have to understand that the state pulls us in a certain direction. Above all, it seeks to impose upon us a separation of our struggles from society, to convert our struggle into a struggle on behalf of, in the name of. It separates leaders from the masses, the representatives from the represented; it draws us into a different way of talking, a different way of thinking. It pulls us into a process of reconciliation with reality, and that reality is the reality of capitalism, a form of social organisation that is based on exploitation and injustice, on killing and destruction. It also draws us into a spatial definition of how we do things, a spatial definition which makes a clear distinction between the state's territory and the world outside, and a clear distinction between citizens and foreigners. It draws us into a spatial definition of struggle that has no hope of matching the global movement of capital.

There is one key concept in the history of the state-centred left, and that concept is betrayal. Time and time again the leaders have betrayed the movement, and not necessarily because they are bad people, but just because the state as a form of organisation separates the leaders from the movement and draws them into a process of reconciliation with capital. Betrayal is already given in the state as an organisational form.

Can we resist this? Yes, of course we can, and it is something that happens all the time. We can refuse to let the state identify leaders or permanent representatives of the movement, we can refuse to let delegates negotiate in secret with the representatives of the state. But this means understanding that our forms of organisation are very different from those of the state, that there is no symmetry between them. The state is an organisation on behalf of, what we want is the organisation of self-determination, a form of organisation that allows us to articulate what we want, what we decide, what we consider necessary or desirable. What we want, in other words, is a form of organisation that does not have the state as its principal point of reference.

The argument against taking the state as the principal point of reference is clear, but what of the other concept? The state-oriented argument can be seen as a pivoted conception of the development of struggle. Struggle is conceived as having a central pivot, the taking of state power. First we concentrate all our efforts on winning the state, we organise for that, then, once we have achieved that, we can think of other forms of organisation, we can think of revolutionising society. First we move in one direction, in order to be able to move in another: the problem is that the dynamic acquired during the first phase is difficult or impossible to dismantle in the second phase.

The other concept focuses directly on the sort of society we want to create, without passing through the state. There is no pivot: organisation is directly prefigurative, directly linked to the social relations we want to create. Where the first concept sees the radical transformation of society as taking place after the seizure of power, the second insists that it must begin now. Revolution not when the time is right but revolution here and now.

This prefiguration, this revolution here-and-now is above all the drive to self-determination. Self-determination cannot exist in a capitalist society. What can and does exist is the drive towards social self-determination: the moving against alien determination, determination by others. Such a moving against determination by others is necessarily experimental, but three things are clear:

(a) The drive towards self-determination is necessarily a drive against allowing others to decide on our behalf. It is therefore a movement against representative democracy and for the creation of some form of direct democracy. (b) The drive towards self-determination is incompatible with the state, which is a form of organisation which decides on our behalf and thereby excludes us. (c) The drive towards self-determination makes no sense unless it includes as its central point the self-determination of our work, our activity. It is necessarily directed against the capitalist organisation of work. We are talking, therefore, not just of democracy but of communism, not just of rebellion but of revolution.

For me, it is this second conception of revolution that we have to concentrate on. The fact that we reject the state-centred conception doesn't obviously mean that the non-state-centred conception does not have its problems. I see three principal problems, none of which is an argument for reverting to the idea of taking state power:

The first issue is how to deal with state repression. I do not think the answer is to arm ourselves so that we can defeat the state in open confrontation: we would be unlikely to win, and anyway it would involve reproducing precisely the authoritarian social relations we are fighting against. Nor do I think that the answer is to take control of the state so that we can control the army and the police forces: the use of the army and police on behalf of the people obviously comes into conflict with the struggles of those who do not want anyone to act on their behalf. This leaves us with trying to find other ways of dissuading the state from exercising violence against us: this may have to involve some degree of armed resistance (as in the case of the Zapatistas), but must surely rely above all on the strength of the integration of the rebellion into the community.

The second issue is whether we can develop alternative doings (alternative productive activity) within capitalism, and to what extent we can create an alternative social nexus

between activities, other than value. There are many experiments that point in the direction of some sort of solution (the fábricas recuperadas, factories reopened by the workers, in Argentina, for example) and the possibilities will obviously depend on the scale of the movement itself, but this remains a major problem. How do we think of a social determination of production and distribution that moves from the bottom up (from the interstitial revolts) rather than from a central planning body?

The third issue is the organisation of social self-determination. How do we organise a system of direct democracy on a scale that goes beyond the local level in a complex society? The classic answer is the idea of councils linked by a council of councils to which the councils send instantly recallable delegates. This seems basically correct, but it is clear that even in small groups the operation of democracy is always problematic, so that the only way in which direct democracy can be conceived is as a constant process of experimentation and self-education.

Can we change the world without taking power? The only way to find out is to do it.

Alex Callinicos:

Whatever our differences, John and I stand for changing the world through a process of self-emancipation, where there aren't leaders who tell people what to do but rather people who collectively liberate themselves. I admire the honesty, clarity and consistency of John's work, which is evident in his presentation today. But I also have to be honest and say that I find the ideal of changing the world without taking power ultimately self-refuting.

I agree with John about uncertainty. There are lots of things we cannot know. But one thing I am certain about. That is that it is impossible to change the world without addressing and solving the question of political power.

I absolutely sympathise with one of the impulses behind the slogan 'Change the world without taking power'. Among a lot of the traditions on the left worldwide there has been what has been called 'socialism from above'. Whether it is a Communist party with Stalinist traditions or a social democratic party like the Workers Party in Brazil today, it involves the idea that the party changes things for you and everyone else remains passive.

The political tradition I stand in is a very different one. It is that of socialism from below summed up in Marx's definition of socialism as the self-emancipation of the working class. Socialism is about the oppressed and exploited of the world effectively liberating themselves.

My fundamental difference with John is that I believe this process of self-emancipation requires us to confront and overthrow the existing state and replacing it with a radically different form of state power.

John invites us essentially to turn our backs on the state. He says that we should carry out what he calls an 'interstitial' revolution. It's been summed up by other thinkers sharing the same ideas as John as life despite capitalism. We should all try and cultivate our autonomous gardens despite the horrors of capitalism.

The trouble is that the state won't leave us alone and that is because capitalism itself, the system that different states sustain, won't leave us alone. Capitalism today is invading the gardens of the world to carve them up and turn them into branches of agribusiness or suburban speculation and won't leave us alone.

We cannot ignore the state, because the state is the most concentrated single form of capitalist power. This means strategically we have to be against the state, to pursue the revolution against the state.

Does this mean we ignore the existing state and do not ever put demands on the capitalist state? No. The existing capitalist states try to legitimise themselves to win the consent of those they oppress and exploit. This means that if we organise effectively, we can force reforms out of capitalism. Also, if we ignore the state, that means we will be indifferent to struggles over privatisation. For example, at the minute George Bush wants to privatise the pensions system in the US. Do we say we don't care about that because the social security system in the US is organised by the state? I think, no.

Finally, many workers these days are employed by the state. Part of the process of privatisation means those employees of private companies replace these workers. Often that means the service to the public is worse and the conditions and wages of those employed by those companies get worse.

But if we are not indifferent to the state, that does not mean we can rely on it. In the long run capitalism and the state which seeks to sustain it will seek to take back any reforms it concedes temporarily. That is what they are seeking to do at the present time.

Moreover, as John has highlighted, the state is a hierarchical organisation which organises violence to keep the mass of society subordinated.

This means we cannot simply try to seize the existing state. If we seize the existing state, in the end, at the worst we will get Stalin, at best we will get someone like Lula or Mbeki in South Africa who comes out of a mass movement which seeks to change the world but ends up administering things for capitalism.

What's the alternative then? It is to build up a movement that is powerful and focused enough to break the existing forms of state power and institute radically different and radically democratic forms of state power. In other words, there has to be a revolution which is not a party taking state power by seizing the existing state, but the oppressed and exploited—above all workers—who break the existing state and in the process of doing so create radically new and democratic forms of power in order to manage society for themselves.

This alternative is not just a fantasy that I've spun out of my head. If we look at the history of the working class movement over the last 150 years, again and again workers have created new ways of organising in order to wage mass struggles effectively. These have been much more democratic, much more subject to the control of the workers themselves. In order to wage their struggles, they have created delegate structures that break down the hierarchy that John talks about. And in doing so they have created new forms of political power, even if they don't know it.

There are many examples: the soviets in the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 are the most famous examples; there were the workers' and soldiers' councils that were formed in the German Revolution of 1918-20; right up to the cordones that were formed in Chile in 1972-73 at the height of the struggles under the Popular Unity government of Allende. There are many other examples of mass popular organisation that represent a new sort of political power.

The important thing about these forms of organisation, whatever the intentions that led to their formation, is that they have the capacity to challenge and break the existing state and institute new forms of power.

We are not saying, as John was suggesting, 'Wait for the revolution.' But any struggles that begin to build towards self-organisation are pointing the way towards the way a future non-capitalist, socialist, society can be organised. The problem is that for any movement towards self-organisation to succeed in breaking the power of capital, there has to be a moment of concentration and centralisation. You can't deal with the concentrated power of capital-the state and the multinational corporations-without the movements themselves becoming focused to confront the power of those corporations directly.

John will say, 'When you talk about centralisation and concentration, you are returning to the old ways of organising, you are beginning to organise in a way that reproduces the centralised and hierarchical structures of the existing state.'

I agree it isn't easy. John was very honest and talked about the difficulties with his strategic conception, and I agree there are difficulties with the approach I am defending. Combining centralisation with self-organisation is not easy. But without a degree of centralisation we will be defeated.

If we simply have fragmented and decentralised and localised activity, all cultivating our autonomous gardens, capital can isolate us and destroy or incorporate us piece by piece. And we cannot address problems like climate change unless we have the capacity to coordinate and, to a degree, to centralise for global change. We cannot reduce CO2 emissions to the necessary level without global coordination. We will not achieve the world we want to see if we simply rely on the fragment and the local.

This is related to the question of parties. John is critical of the party as a form of organisation. He says it reproduces the hierarchical structures of the existing state. But if we look at our movement, there are parties within the movement-that is, there are ideologically organised currents which have in their different ways a total strategic view of the transformation of society. In that sense of party, John and the people who think like him are as much a party within the different movements as are the Workers Party and the PSOL in Brazil,¹ or the Socialist Workers Party in Britain.

1: The new left wing party formed by those expelled from the Workers Party. People who organise such a current can say they are not a party, but it is a form of self-deception. Recognising the role parties can play in the movements can lead to a more honest and open articulation of different strategies and visions for change. Parties can contribute to

the development of a movement that is both self-organised and sufficiently coherent to take on the task of social transformation, of revolution.

My ideal in this respect is the one articulated by the great Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci. He talked about the dialectical interaction between the moment of centralisation represented by the parties and the self-organised impulse from the movement which is the fundamental driving force of revolution.

To sum up: First of all we cannot avoid the question of the state and political power. It is a delusion to believe we can avoid it. The critical question is who takes power and how. If it is simply a question of a party taking control of the existing state by whatever means, then it is absolutely true that will be a change that simply reproduces the existing relations of domination. But the conception of a self-organised working class seizing power to institute new forms of political organisation and state organisation along with all the other oppressed and exploited groups changes the question.

Revolution then becomes a process of self-emancipation which starts here and now, in the way we organise resistance to capitalism, and culminates when we create a self-organised society, and capitalism and all the oppression associated with it becomes simply a bad memory.

First contributor from the floor:

I agree mainly with John's idea. This discussion is not new. The same discussion happened in the 19th century. The people who believed we should focus on taking power in the state won the debate, and they created movements in that direction. Stalin was one result, Lula another. Once the state becomes the focus of the fight we cannot avoid the change becoming just a mirror of the state. The revolution was not really a revolution for the people.

Second contributor:

We haven't looked so far at Venezuela in this debate. There both sides of the question are being developed. They are looking at the state while making the internal transformation from below, beginning with the new constitution which embodies decentralisation and participation. Economically they are undertaking development, with agrarian reform, ending landlordism and redistributing land to the peasantry. Educationally they are ending illiteracy for 3 million people. By participatory democracy and social inclusion they are trying to bring about the self-emancipation talked about here. Venezuela represents a new and quite different way of resolving the questions we are discussing here. It is achieving levels of self-organisation that mean it is no longer dependent on the world system. It is five years since the IMF and World Bank determined what happened there.

Third contributor:

All over the world we have people creating progressive parties based on a mishmash of neo-Keynesian policies, reform, reinstating regulation and so on. If we advocate revolution here and now, simultaneously with an attempt to replace the state by the anti-

state, we have to think about what the alternative is going to be. Capitalism is the indefinite accumulation of capital until the point where you have the obscenity of money in the hands of so few that it really amounts to mass destruction. We should add to the Chávez revolution the ideas put out by Z magazine that look back to Marx's idea of a federation of producers and turn it into a federation of producers and consumers.

Fourth contributor:

I want to ask two questions. One, what is the significance of the concept of fissure or crack which John uses? The second is whether there is not some concept of power other than that of state power.

Fifth contributor (Chris Nineham, SWP):

There is a sense in which this debate has been false. John made a very good critique of the tradition which says a small number of people should take power for everyone else. It is a critique of social democracy, of a whole tradition of trying to operate from above through getting a few individuals into the state. That is a failed strategy. Those people always get drawn into the system. They get bullied, bought off or simply compromise with capitalism.

But that is not an argument against the Marxist tradition of revolutionary politics which says that the capitalist society is our enemy. We have to get rid of the capitalist state and create a society that is based on a completely different, radically grassroots structure.

John's solution is effectively to say that we just ignore the state. The question of how we challenge state power has to be central to everything we discuss, since state power is so visibly shaping the world around us today.

One reason we cannot avoid confronting the state is that the state tries to divide us, it tries to separate off each struggle from every other, women from men, gays from straights, whites from blacks, and make us think of ourselves in the smallest possible way. We have to have an argument in the movement that unity is strength-and that argument has to be organised. Learning to act together and discussing it consciously is essential if we are to develop a strategy to take on the power of the state.

Sixth contributor:

I would really like to know how John's theory of changing the world would apply to Iraq or Palestine, where people are being attacked daily and their lives turned into misery by the state. They cannot ignore the state. They have to fight it directly, head on.

My relatives live in Iran. I live in Britain. If the British state attacks Iran, do I simply ignore it?

Seventh contributor (from South Korea):

We can change the world by taking power or by not taking power. The difference is one of time. Taking power will be quicker. We should not be afraid to take power, because we are the ones who will change the world.

John Holloway:

A lot of people did not want to talk about revolution a few years ago. But today lots of people want to. Alex and myself are in agreement on this.

Secondly, someone said this is a false debate. But Alex and I were not saying the same thing. We have different perspectives. We have different conceptions of the state. For me it is a specific, capitalist form of social relations which excludes us, Alex talks about a workers' state and the possibility of a radical democratisation of the state. According to my conception that is absolutely absurd, since the state has a form of organisation that excludes us.

To talk about a radical movement, a soviet movement for instance, culminating in the creation of a new state, is nonsense because a really democratic organisation, a council organisation goes in one direction while the state is a form of organisation that goes in the opposite direction. To talk about a working class state introduces confusion that conceals the most horrific process of repression and violence that we have seen several times in the 20th century.

The questioner who spoke of us turning our backs on the state-I am not saying we should ignore the state. It would be lovely if we could. In a way that is what the Zapatistas are doing now. They are turning their backs on the state. But that is not something that most of us can do. I am an employee of the state. It is not about pretending the state does not exist. It is about understanding the state as a specific form of social relations which pushes us in certain directions, and trying to think about how we can struggle against those forms of social relations and push in a different direction, so that our relation is in and beyond and against the state. It would be lovely if we could pretend that the state does not exist. Unfortunately we can't. But we certainly don't have to fall into the state as a central reference point in terms of logic or of power or space.

The question of Venezuela is very important for all the Latin Americans here. I liked the way the question was presented. It was not as it is sometimes put in terms of 'Venezuela shows we must take power.' It was in terms of Venezuela shows there has to be a combination of the two approaches-the state-oriented approach and the non-state-oriented approach. This is what characterises the World Social Forum, this combination, a cooperation, between these two different approaches. But in that we have to see there is always a tension, a contradiction, between on the one hand saying, 'We ourselves shall decide how society will develop' and on the other hand saying, 'The state will decide for you or show you how to decide for yourselves.' It will be very important to see how that tension plays itself out in Venezuela.

On the question of fissures. We often feel helpless because capitalism weighs so heavily on us. But when we say No we start off with an appreciation of our own strength. When we rebel we are in fact tearing a little hole in capitalism. It is very contradictory. By rebelling we are already saying no to the command of capital. We are creating temporary spaces. Within that crack, that fissure, it is important that we fight for other social relations that don't point towards the state, but that they point towards the sort of society we want to create. At the core of these fissures is the drive to self-determination. And

then it is a question of working out what does this mean, and how to be organised for self-determination. It means being against and beyond the society that exists. Of expanding the fissures, how to push these fissures forward structurally.

The people who say we should take control of the state are also talking about cracks. There is no choice but to start with interstices. The question is how we think of them, because the state is not the whole world. There are 200 states. If you seize control of one, it is still only a crack in capitalism. It is a question of how we think about those cracks, those fissures. And if we start off from ourselves, why on earth should we adopt capitalist, bourgeois forms for developing our struggle? Why should we accept the template of the concept of the state?

It is impossible to focus on the state without having a special definition of struggle. It means struggling within the space of the state, whereas at the World Social Forum we are in rebellion against that space. The space defines a concept of space and time.

Alex Callinicos:

John said we have a transhistorical conception of the state which separates the state off from capitalist relations of production. So let me say clearly that the state under which we live is an irredeemably capitalist state. I don't want to be part of a movement whose aim is to take control of the existing capitalist state.

Nevertheless, this is not the only state that has existed in history. There have been many different forms of state in the history of class society. What they have all had in common is organised and institutionalised class violence, the violence of an exploiting minority over an exploited majority.

The question we are addressing now is, 'Can the working class as it organises itself collectively and socially to resist exploitation by capital turn this situation round?' In other words, can the working class create its own form of organised class violence, distinctively working class in the way it is organised but which makes the struggle against exploitation by capital more effective and also helps the working class build a new society? As John knows, the answer to that question in the classic tradition of Marxism, in the writing of Marx and Lenin, is yes. There is the idea of a workers' state, of workers' power, which is a temporary transitional form through which the working class organises itself to get rid of capitalism and as part of the same process democratically organises itself to create a new form of society.

I used the L word, I mentioned Lenin, and of course John will say this question was tried and proved to be definitely wrong during the Russian Revolution of 1917 and particularly with the Stalinist aftermath.

One of the contributions referred to the great debate between Marx and Bakunin at the time of the First International in the late 19th century. He said that the experience of Stalinism proved that Bakunin's anti-state position had been proved to be right.

But how did that happen? If the idea is that state thinking was deep in Marx or Lenin's head and that led to Stalinism, it is simply wrong. Marx said we need a revolution against

the state in his critique of Bakunin. It was an idea Lenin enthusiastically took up during the 1917 revolution.

So how did it happen? John talked about fissures. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was a fissure. It tore a great hole in the capitalist system, the biggest fissure so far in world history. But just to break a hole in capitalism, even a hole as big as Russia, was not enough. There was a simple reason. The power of capital is global and it can concentrate its forces massively to destroy any fissure that threatens it. That is what they have been trying to do with Chávez in Venezuela. Whatever the problem is with his politics and so on, the US and its allies have been trying to break the experiment taking place in Venezuela because it threatens to open up a fissure.

The power of capital is so great that usually they can close the fissures. Usually they do so by overthrowing the revolutionary process and destroying its leaders and activists. There are many examples of that. In the Russian case there was a particularly horrible way in which capital won, by creating such pressures as to cause the revolutionary regime to transform itself into a barbarous replica of the global system.

The reason that happened was not that Marx liked the state, but that there was not a powerful enough global movement to break the power of capital globally. That doesn't have to be our fate. We are already in the process collectively of creating the greatest global movement against capitalism in world history. But we won't do that if we think that simply creating holes, fissures, in the existing system is enough to destroy it.

Eighth contributor (South Korean woman):

If you say we can change the world without taking power, you are saying that the capitalist power that exists right now is acceptable. Holloway says that the state excludes us. But the state oppresses us at every level. Even our sexuality is oppressed by the state. I come from South Korea where we have a history of military dictatorship and they have crushed a beautiful resistance. It is not that the state excludes us but that at every level it oppresses us.

Alex is not saying we have to go into the state and use the power of the capitalist state. He is saying we have to create new forms of power where the working class will form an organisation capable of overthrowing the capitalist state.

Ninth contributor:

Karl Marx said the state was the executive committee of the bourgeoisie, and that is exactly what it is. Its laws and its procedures protect profit at the expense of ordinary people and it won't give up those things lightly. That is why we have to deal with the question of state power.

Tenth contributor (Chris Harman, SWP):

John Holloway said that the position which revolutionary socialists put forward means that we focus activity on the state. This is not true. Most of our activity consists in being involved in struggles of one sort or another—struggles against repression, struggles for

women's liberation, struggles against racism, struggles over wages, above all at the moment the struggle against the horrific war waged against Iraq. But what we know from the experience of our movements is that every time those struggles reach a certain stage you come up against bodies of armed men-and these days mainly armed men and some armed women. And this is the core of the state. John, you use the word state in a wider sense- sometimes we all use it in a wider sense-but the key sector we are concerned with is these bodies of armed men.

You can then have two approaches. You can pretend that you can control them or ignore them. There is the approach of the social democrats. John says we have the same approach as Lula. We don't. Lula believes he controls the Brazilian state. In reality the Brazilian state and Brazilian capitalism control Lula. The hierarchies of armed forces officers, the generals, are the same as were there under the military dictatorship. All that is different is a different president and a different parliament.

The other approach is to say that you can ignore the state, leave it to later. That is all right until it starts breaking up your picket line or waging war. Every struggle reaches a moment where the question of force becomes decisive.

Gramsci made the point in his distinction between a war of position, a slow struggle to unify people, to fight back, to get some resistance. That is what we are involved in most of the time. But at some point you have to wage a war of manoeuvre. You have to move forward to challenge the state. And if you don't do that, Latin America is full of histories of what happens. In 1964 the military coup in Brazil, in 1973 the coup in Uruguay, in 1973 in Chile, in 1976 in Argentina. On each occasion people said, 'We don't need to challenge the state, just build the movements from below with the parliamentarians and we will win.' On each occasion the state hit back.

And I say to the comrades who talk about Venezuela, unfortunately, the state in Venezuela is still essentially the same state as before. The country has transformed itself massively in the last six years. It is much more hopeful than six years ago. But the state remains the same. Many of the old officers are still there, the civil service works in the same way, the same hierarchies remain. And so at some point in Venezuela the point will come where either people will begin to form workers' and soldiers' councils to challenge that state or the state will crush them.

John Holloway's real misunderstanding of Marxism is not to understand that the central point of Marxism is that from below we can create new structures, structures that have to be democratic, have to be based on mass self-emancipation, self-activity, but have to be centralised and have at some decisive point to disarm the ruling class before they kill us.

Eleventh contributor:

I want to use the experience of Argentina since the Argentinazo of 2001 to underline the points made by Alex. We had the biggest movement of the unemployed anywhere in the world in recent years. Factories were occupied and taken over by workers. They demonstrated that you did not need a capitalist class to keep production going. In the districts of the capital popular assemblies were extremely radical. In hundreds of places

people got together and discussed and determined how they would act and what political direction they would take. And in the first few weeks after the Argentinazo several governments were overthrown. There was a brutal process in which many comrades died. It was an example of how we can develop our movements.

But what Argentina showed, brutally, was how the state still existed. We have all these examples of important and very radical organisations. But not only did the state exclude and marginalise us, it turned on us, it repressed us, it drove down our wages and repressed our movement. Today there are 30 political prisoners in Argentina and thousands more who are due for trial at some point soon, and we have in power a government under Kirchner which is not particularly different to Lula.

The state showed how real its existence was. On the other hand we had a huge popular mobilisation, created radical movements involving very large numbers of people which nevertheless had this weakness, which is they did not address the question of state power. So today we still have a capitalist government despite the movement's existence and its combativity, It's not enough for workers to develop a social movement, although its existence is indispensable. We also need a perspective of taking on the question of political power. Otherwise the state will show its existence with attacks on us.

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