

## Rethinking the Idea of Revolution (on Holloway)

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Of the many issues facing the effort to rethink the idea of revolution today, few are more vexing than that of state power. Does social revolution center on the political seizure of state power? If it doesn't, what must be done instead? Can a revolution transform human relations so fundamentally that we will not again be confronted with a statist bureaucracy after the overthrow of the old?

For many years even the greatest revolutionaries tended to focus first and foremost on the political seizure of state power, leaving until later the question of how to fundamentally transform social relations. That approach defined the attitude of the generation that made the Russian Revolution of 1917. As Lenin noted after 1917, making the revolution was relatively easy; figuring out how to reorganize conditions of life and labor after the seizure of power proved far more difficult.

When the Russian revolution became transformed into a totalitarian dictatorship under Stalin in the 1930s, a different concept of the road to a new society began to emerge. It showed itself in the Spanish Revolution of 1936, where workers and peasants occupied the factories and farms as the prelude to the political transformation of society. Instead of first seizing state power and then figuring out how to change living conditions, the Spanish masses sought to transform production relations in the very course of their struggle. The new questions posed by this proved of key importance in leading to the birth of Marxist-Humanism.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, the Spanish masses' disclosure of a new dialectic of liberation that combined economics and politics did not become the point of departure for revolutions that followed. Thanks in part to the acts of the Stalinists, the Spanish Revolution was defeated by fascism in 1939. Then in the post-World War II era Stalinism and Social-Democracy dominated left politics worldwide. The tendency to seize political power and impose State Property and the State Plan, while leaving aside the radical transformation of human relations, predominated on the part of both reformists and revolutionists.

Yet things have begun to change since 1989. The collapse of the state-capitalist regimes which called themselves Communist in East Europe and Russia, and the impasse experienced by post-revolutionary regimes in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, have led many to question the approach of focusing on seizing state power without specifying how to transform human relations. It is as if the questions posed by the Spanish Revolution of 1936 are returning to the forefront of discussion.

### **SHOULD WE SEIZE POWER?**

John Holloway's book *CHANGE THE WORLD WITHOUT TAKING POWER* is a welcome contribution to this discussion. He argues against the notion that "first we win power and then we shall create a new society." The state, he notes, is not an instrument that exists outside of capitalism; capitalist relations are instead thoroughly embedded in the modern state. A focus on seizing state power inevitably leads radicals to reproduce the basic hierarchies of capitalism—of leaders versus led, of power-over versus power-to-do.

Capital, he says, is not just something that exists outside us; it is based on the separation between doing and done, between subject and object. When radicals focus on seizing control of the state they soon find themselves upholding the very relations of capital they had earlier sworn to oppose: "Once the logic of power is adopted, the struggle against power is already lost" (p. 17).

Holloway instead calls for creating relations of "anti-power"—that is, dissolving relations of power-over-others in our everyday struggles: "This project is far more radical than any notion of revolution based on the conquest of power and at the same time far more realistic." His model is the Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico, who eschewed any notion of trying to seize state power after their revolt of 1994.

The Zapatistas' focus on developing new forms of resistance has surely made a valuable contribution to reconceptualizing the idea of revolution. At the same time, the power of the Mexican state in isolating and repressing the Zapatistas shows that the problem of state power can in no way be bypassed. The state still needs to be confronted, challenged, and ultimately SMASHED. Yet since the state is the expression of capital, it will not vanish overnight; it will persist in some form until we have created a new society of freely associated labor on a world scale. This raises the thorny question of how we can contest the power of the state without falling prey to its logic of domination.

Holloway does not really tackle this question. In critiquing the idea of taking state power, he says little about how to deal with the persistence of the state before and after a social revolution.

### **A DIALECTIC OF NEGATIVITY?**

So what can we do? To Holloway, “flies caught in a web of social relations beyond our control, we can only try to free ourselves by hacking at the strands that imprison us.” That means, he says, focusing on negation, on “a rejection of a world we feel to be wrong.” “The aim of this book,” he writes, “is to strengthen negativity...to negate in whatever way we can the negativeness of our existence” (pp. 5, 8).

Holloway tries to ground his stress on negativity in dialectical philosophy. Unlike other autonomist Marxists like Antonio Negri, he does not reject dialectics. However, he does not really discuss Hegel’s dialectic or what Marx drew from it. He instead bases himself on the “negative dialectics” of Theodor Adorno.

Contrary to some latter-day epigones who dismiss Adorno because of his distance from the practical struggles of his day, Marxist-Humanists have considered Adorno’s **NEGATIVE DIALECTICS** one of the most important books ever written on dialectics.<sup>2</sup> Holloway’s ability to appropriate Adorno for key issues facing activists shows that Adorno’s ideas are in no way destined to remain in the ivory tower.

Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between Adorno’s negative dialectics and the Hegelian-Marxian dialectic of negativity. Adorno sought to eliminate the “affirmative” character of the dialectic—the notion that the positive emerges from “the negation of the negation.” For Hegel, as for Marx, the transcendence of alienation arises not just from negating what exists, but from the “negation of the negation”—the projection not just of what you’re against but what you’re for. Adorno saw his aim as “to free dialectics from such affirmative traits.” To Adorno, “negative dialectics” means a ceaseless process of negation without any assurance of a positive outcome arising from it.

As Adorno sought to “free” negativity from the positive in the realm of philosophy, Holloway seeks to do so in politics. He uses Adorno to oppose the way “what was initially negative (the rejection of capitalism) is converted into something positive (institution-building, power building)” (p. 15).

Does Holloway’s reliance on Adorno’s negative dialectics aid or impair his effort to project a concept of liberation that takes us beyond the limits of past failed revolutions?

To answer this we must turn to his discussion of commodity fetishism, the theoretical core of his book.

### **BEYOND COMMODITY FETISHISM**

Holloway shows that Marx's critique of commodity fetishism pinpoints the central problem of capitalism. The problem is not just that we are dominated by a power outside us, the state or the capitalist class, but that our human relations take on the form of relations between things. Fetishism "refers to the breaking of the social flow of doing, the turning of doing against itself" (p. 45). Unless we confront and uproot this, Holloway insists, we will never be free.

Yet this raises a difficult issue. Marx says in *CAPITAL* that human relations in capitalism appear to take on the form of relations between things because "that is what they really are." Commodity fetishism is no illusion; it defines the nature of our lives. But if that is so, is it even possible for us to think outside the fetish?

This problem has bedeviled some of the greatest Marxists. Georg Lukács, for one, argued that the transformation of human relations into relations between things affects everyone in capitalism, workers as well as capitalists. But if we are all subject to the fetish, how can we get out of it? Lukács responded by saying the Party serves as the "knowing" of the proletariat. By assigning to the Party "the sublime role of class consciousness," Lukács sought to chart a path from our present fetishized existence to the goal of a new society.

Holloway rightly critiques Lukács for this on the grounds that Lukács never provided an adequate account of HOW the Party becomes the bearer of class consciousness. It is just asserted. Holloway says that Lukács reached for an external mediator to resolve the problem of fetishism, "the Party," instead of having it arise from the internal struggles of the masses.

Adorno also argued that the transformation of human relations into relations between things applies to everyone. However, he didn't follow Lukács on the Party. For Adorno the way out was through permanent critique by "small groups of admirable men." Holloway says this approach was also unviable, for it never explained what enables the radical critic to rise above the alienation he opposes.

Holloway takes a different approach. He sees the way out as lying in the everyday resistance engendered by those opposing oppression. We cannot feel alienated, he notes, unless we have some sense of what it means to be non-alienated. This friction between our everyday oppression and our sense that we are more than a mere object of oppression

breeds negativity, resistance. This negativity, he argues, is the font from which we can break through the fetishism of commodities.

Holloway's discussion of commodity fetishism is both the best and the most problematic part of his book. It is the best insofar as he rightly critiques intellectuals like Lukács and Adorno for never providing an adequate account of how to surmount commodity fetishism. It is also problematic insofar as Holloway does not really follow Marx's discussion of how to surmount the problem of fetishism in CAPITAL.

In CAPITAL Marx presents the fetishism of commodities as all-pervasive in capitalism. So how can we get out of it? In the midst of his discussion Marx suddenly writes, "Let us IMAGINE, for a change, an association of free men." Marx takes us into the future, into a realm where humanity has eliminated value production. He presupposes a positive transcendence of capitalism and from this standpoint penetrates the mystery of commodity fetishism. He writes, "The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life process . . . until it becomes production by freely associated men."

Marx's presupposition of a transcendence of capitalism was no mere utopian speculation. It was a philosophic generalization of the praxis achieved by the masses in the Paris Commune of 1871, who developed a new form of freely associated labor. Indeed, Marx did not even have a separate section on commodity fetishism in the original 1867 edition of CAPITAL; it was only in the French edition of 1872-75, issued AFTER the Paris Commune, that Marx was able to both make a CATEGORY of commodity fetishism and fully show the INTERNAL way out of it.

For Marx mere negativity by itself does not surmount the fetishism of commodities. To transcend fetishism the power of negativity must become absolute, that is, inseparable from a vision of the future, a notion of the transcendence of value production. Marx could project such a vision because he held tightly to Hegel's concept of "the negation of the negation"—that is, not only the destruction of the old but the creation of the new.

It is this which Holloway keeps his distance from. He is so overburdened with the way traditional Marxists have taken what was initially negative (the rejection of capitalism) and turned it into something "positive" (power building), that he, like Adorno, holds back from embracing the positive which emanates from the movement of absolute negativity.

This not only means that he falls short of Marx's approach in CAPITAL. It means Holloway does not really resolve the problem he is grappling with. For history shows that ceaseless negativity by itself does not free us from the stranglehold of commodity

fetishism. Without a vision of a future non-exploiting society, we remain at mere first negation—opposing what is—without having a sense that we can create a non-alienated reality.

### **DRAWS ON CRITIQUE OF LUXEMBURG**

Holloway's aversion to projecting such a vision comes out from his critique of Rosa Luxemburg's view in *REFORM OR REVOLUTION* (1898) that "The final goal of socialism constitutes the only decisive factor distinguishing the [revolutionary] movement from bourgeois democracy." Luxemburg, he says, held the final goal to be the conquest of political power. But surely Luxemburg went further, as seen in her profound critique of Lenin in 1918 on the need for revolutionary democracy after the conquest of power.

Moreover, Luxemburg was absolutely right to say in 1898 that "It is only because Marx looked at capitalism from the socialist viewpoint...that he was enabled to decipher the hieroglyphics of capitalist economy." Given today's far more mystified relations of capital it has become even more crucial to view reality from the vantage point of a socialist future.

Holloway is right that Marx's *CAPITAL* is often wrongly viewed as "a theory of capitalism," as if Marx was providing a mere sociological analysis. *CAPITAL*, Holloway insists, is a theory of the *DESTRUCTION* of capitalism, a view of its transitoriness and non-viability. What Holloway does not seem to see is that Marx was able to theorize the destruction of capital because he brought to bear upon his analysis a vision of the future which flowed from his rootedness in *BOTH* proletarian struggles *AND* Hegel's concept of the positive which emerges from "the negation of the negation."

This is what we have been missing since Marx's death and explains why so many have failed to project a path to liberation that goes beyond the capture of state power. What is needed is neither to focus everything on seizing state power nor to leave the question of the state aside. What our generation needs is a concept of what happens *AFTER* the revolution, what kind of human relations must be created at work, between men and woman, between the races, and in society as a whole, in order for capital to be transcended.

To grapple with this entails probing deeply into the concept of absolute negativity as new beginning. Though Holloway's work falls short of this, it raises many questions which can aid the effort of doing so in this year of our newest work, *THE POWER OF NEGATIVITY*.

CHANGE THE WORLD WITHOUT TAKING POWER

by John Holloway. Pluto Press, 2002. 240 pp.

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