

# **Book Review: Change the World Without Taking Power**

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## **Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today**

*John Holloway*

This book has arrived at a crucial point for many radicals and should be welcomed by us all. The recent mass anti-capitalist mobilizations, great explosions of energy and refusal, were mere crashing waves betraying a greater tidal surge, a movement fuelled by a cry: No! Enough! The cry of refusal carries on day-by-day—not just at the big events like Seattle or Genoa. We face a contradictory existence, a fragmented, confusing life, which appears alien to us. John Holloway's new book does not provide answers to these issues, but does something much more important. As we try to search for meaning the answers come not in abstract looking, but doing; and the will to change the world comes not from reflection, but daily experience and struggle. This is an untypical work of political theory. In fact we could question the extent to which it is 'theory' at all.

Setting a quasi-existentialist, philosophical yet polemical tone, Holloway begins from the primacy of 'the Scream,' the "scream of the insect trapped in a web", tangled, struggling—desperate to free itself yet seemingly powerless; an "undefined subjectivity." But after disastrous attempts during the twentieth century, after bloodshed and betrayal, is liberation still possible? Of course it is. We just have to change the world without taking power by going beyond the state and capital and creating our own social relations based upon mutual recognition.

It seems absurd to us: politics is all about power, and power is exercised through the state. So, it's a simple step. All we need to do is build a mass party and wield the state for our own purposes. Both strands of this thought—the revolutionary and the reformist—have been shown to be failures in both blood and betrayal. (Though how far we can dismiss these as 'failures' is something we should question, for they too were part of the struggles of millions of men and women for a better world.) According to Holloway, this arises from a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of resistance. We have to bypass the state, for it is not a separate entity in its own right (the mistake of Poulantzas and others) but is bound up in the same processes of separation and domination as capital. It is not a thing, but a series of social relationships, what Karl Marx termed the 'illusory community.'

Past revolutions were not revolutionary enough for they ended up reproducing the very things they sought to get rid of. It is not that they were lacking in violence or spontaneity or anything like that. Holloway's point is subtler and paradoxically—there are a lot of paradoxes, absurdities and contradictions in this book—radical. The question of revolution must be rethought, reformulated and reinvented; before we can even start to change the world, we must begin by recognizing the sticky mess we are in. There are no first principles, no vantage points from which to see the way out. Holloway opens the field of play, widens and deepens our questioning, undermines our assumptions and previously held ideals. Radical change has been fought for through the past thirty years by movements that do not have the aim of capturing the state

but changing society: feminists, gay and lesbian activists, civil rights movements, and so on. They have been more successful than many revolutions in changing attitudes and social practices. But how can we expand on this? We do not know. This lack of knowing, for Holloway, is the starting point of radical change.

The bulk of the book is taken up with a complex but compelling discussion of the processes of doing, power and fetishism, wherein Holloway deploys Marxian categories in a more ambiguous but all-encompassing vocabulary. The continually contested separation of ‘doing’ (human activity, living labour) and ‘the done’ (dead labour, capital) means that relations between people are reduced to relations between things. The social flow of doing, what Holloway terms human ‘power-to’, is broken by ‘power-over’. Capital and labour do not stand in external relation to each other, as traditional Marxist theory (but not Marx) holds. This inner relationship is, though, unstable; capital is much more dependent on labour than vice versa. But his vocabulary enables him to bring in other areas of struggle under the same discussion, so the book has relevance for wider struggles.

We humans make our own social relations and are the only ones who can change them, but our existence is a struggle against our own self-negation. The contradictory and contested process of fetishisation forms ‘common sense’ in our society and explains why many of us accept poverty and misery. Change becomes just a dream, a deviation from the way ‘things are’. “Possibilities are torn from us and we are left with a ‘we are’: identification” (a concept he has borrowed from Theodor Adorno). But it is a contested, schizophrenic identification: “If fetishism were an accomplished fact ... then there is no way we could criticise fetishism.” Our everyday existence is a series of struggles, hidden and open, violent and suppressed, conscious and unconscious. “We are not a sleeping beauty, a humanity frozen in our alienation until our prince-party comes to kiss us, we live rather in constant struggle to free ourselves from the witches curse.” Any radical social change must therefore be anti-fetishistic in its approach, but the very opposite of fetishism is precisely the “dark void” which cannot be seen or plotted, the path we make by treading, the questions we ask in asking itself.

Holloway strives to reveal the contradictions of our everyday existence. His aim is to “strengthen the scream, to make it more strident”, not to guide or emasculate it, to make a ‘pure’ movement, as past radicals believed. He makes a clear, and in my view largely successful, attempt to put this as the central argument of his book, though he does seem to miss the glaring contradiction that capitalist society has brought great advances as well as great misery, and that it is precisely this antagonism which gives us the potential to “blast open the continuum of history,” especially if, as Holloway insists, history is contingent and without guarantees.

Such paradoxes and contradictions are not surprising from someone with such admiration for the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas. Its influence on Holloway’s style is clear, and contrasts with the historical grounding of Karl Marx’s writings. The book is not prescriptive—to the point of frustration, I don’t mind admitting—but it does have an awareness of its own relationship with the reader, a Mephistophelean quality.

Holloway doesn't simply tell us his argument and leave it there, he invites criticism and makes ironic gestures towards his own positions: "'Romantic'—'Noble, but not very realistic'—'We have to deal with the reality of class struggle ...'" anticipating disapproval that (true to form) has arisen from the Old Guard dinosaurs and dogmatists. Alas, the point is not to "swell the ranks of the militants", but to be "ordinary, therefore rebellious." Indeed, "there is nothing special about our critique of capitalism ... our scream and our criticism are perfectly ordinary."

We do not know how to proceed other than with what the movement spews forth itself, for the seeds of the alternative society grow in the relationships built by our non-hierarchical free self-activity, our 'anti-power'. Following the anti-identitarianism of Adorno, we should not rely on the 'working class' as agents of this process, because the most important aspect of our struggle is our desire to break free from such classifications: our struggles are about moving beyond class, "we are and are not working class." To begin from the definitions imposed on us means implicitly to accept them. Instead of telling others where they should go, we should learn to listen and think in terms of these contradictions.

This is not a cop-out. It does not mean that we should justify everything done in the name of anti-capitalism, that the movement can do no wrong or that we cannot criticize it. Quite the opposite: it entails a negative, questioning movement which instead of plotting a direct course of social change, moves like ripples in water, ever outward. "It seems an empty answer," he writes with typical flourish:

"Our training tells us to look for a positive force as the substance of hope, but what we have found is more like Fichte's 'dark void': non-identity, a god who says not 'I am who I am', but 'We are not who we are, and we are who we are not.' That is what is disturbing about this whole argument: we want a positive force to hold on to, and all that this argument seems to offer is the negative void of non-identity."

Even when "the conditions for a power-free society are created it will always be necessary to struggle against the recrudescence of power-over." For revolution is a question, and the book finishes where it begins, with us—though, in a brilliant twist, it has no 'ending' as such. Only we can make the 'answers'. No one said it was easy!

If we follow the dictum of Marx and submit everything to "ruthless criticism", we must also include in this the very categories of Marxism itself. Indeed, the book is suffused with (constructive) criticism of traditional Marxism, the Frankfurt School and autonomist class composition theory, including the latest work of Hardt and Negri. If history "weighs like a nightmare on the mind of the living" we must assume that this also applies to the history of Marxism itself. John Holloway's book—more Paris Manuscripts than Kapital—is a rich and thoughtful, provocative and sometimes frustrating work. It invites criticism, but is an ultimately admirable and compelling attempt to move the debate forwards and upwards.

Now, if we could just figure out how to do it ...

Change the World is available from Pluto

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Bad Subjects: Political Education For Everyday Life.

<<http://eserver.org/bs/reviews/2002-12-3-04.19PM.html>> [now dead]. Republished  
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