

On a Recent Book by John Holloway

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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, Mikail 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 classification 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.

**Appendix:
Screams and spit**

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

[43]

(i) 'Spit on history', John Holloway retorts. [44] 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.*' [45] 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. [46] 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. [47] 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. [48] 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.](#) 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.
- [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 stratification 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.

[43.](#) John Holloway responded to the above piece in **ContreTemps** no.?? with an article entitled *Drive Your Cart and Your Plough Over the Bones of the Dead*, Holloway 2004. The following is Bensaïd's riposte.

[44.](#) Quotes from Holloway 2004.

[45.](#) In French in Holloway's text: 'Make a clean sweep of the past' [translator's note].

[46.](#) Quotes from Nietzsche 2004.

[47.](#) See, for example, Bensaïd 2002b, and Callinicos 1995 and 2004.

[48.](#) On Benjamin, see Bensaïd 1990.

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