

Let us change the world without taking power violently

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Abstract

Written in the form of a letter to a comrade, this text presents a political balance sheet on the work of John Holloway on radical social change. The strength of his work lies in its acute insight into the psychology of subjects resisting capitalism, the expansion of the concept of political agency to embrace myriad forms of everyday 'breaks' from capitalism's systemic grip, and the poetic prose that graces Holloway's major works, *Change the World without Taking Power* and *Crack Capitalism*. Points of critique include the difficulty and thus limited utility of the arguments that provide the foundation for these insights, the constraints posed by staying within the theoretical universe of Marxism, and the determined refusal of all forms of engagement with the state. The author argues that the forms taken by radical social change in the twenty-first century are more varied than Holloway's major works suggest, and that, in particular, nonviolent social movements such as Latin America's Pink Tide and the Arab Spring help us imagine multiple paths to radical social change today.

Keywords

Arab Spring, *Change the World*, *Crack Capitalism*, Holloway, Occupy Wall Street, Pink Tide, radical social change, revolutions

John Foran
February 2012

Dear John,

I'm writing not only because you so generously asked me to (although you spoke of an article, not a letter, sorry), but because of what your work means to me. I hardly ever write a letter nowadays, it's a dying art. So you can see that this is a big deal for me, too.

I write because you've made a big impression on me. Your two books of the twenty-first century, *Change the World without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today* (Holloway, 2002a, hereafter *Change* – is it coincidence or affinity that my book on

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twentieth-century revolutions is called *Taking Power* [Foran, 2005]?) and *Crack Capitalism* (Holloway, 2010, hereafter *Crack*), are a precious resource for revolutionaries and radicals. (I will also be referring quite a bit to your essay 'Revolt and Revolution Or Get out of the Way, Capital!' [Holloway, 2002a], which puts very concisely some of the key points of the more famous *Crack*). I have no doubt that these writings will stand as classics of how radical social change happens, and will actually help make radical social change happen, well into this century. Most fatefully, perhaps, they will resonate in the coming decade, where an unprecedented global crisis rages, barely contained by the powers that be, affecting billions of us across a spectrum of economic precarity, rampant inequality, and poverty, the criminal militarism of US foreign policy, and the ecological time bomb, ticking ever faster.

So let's see what we've got to talk about ...

Well, for starters, to have lived to witness 2011 is ... words pretty much fail here. We witnessed spectacular protests and uprisings in the UK (university cuts and privatization), Chile (students, again), Greece (economic ruin), Spain (*indignados* dancing in the midst of crisis), the US (for a change, so to speak), India (against government corruption), Israel's tent cities, South Africa (where the global climate justice movement confronted the fossils of capitalist stupidity), and, of course, the Arab Spring of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, causing tyrants to tremble much further afield in all directions.

And since you have already theorized and imagined these events as well as anyone, your thoughts about them are welcomed, and I'd love to see you take these cases up. You also wrote what is, to my mind, one of the most beautiful revolutionary passages in the annals of radical thought, simultaneously radical manifesto, theory, method, strategy, and vision. Let's take the time to read it out loud, since it's a kind of poetry, or free verse, you might say.

There is nothing special about being an anti-capitalist revolutionary. This is the story of many, many people, of millions, perhaps billions.

It is the story of the composer in London who expresses his anger and his dream of a better society through the music he composes. It is the story of the gardener in Cholula who creates a garden to struggle against the destruction of nature. Of the car worker in Birmingham who goes in the evenings to his garden allotment so that he has some activity that has meaning and pleasure for him. Of the indigenous peasants in Oventic, Chiapas, who create an autonomous space of self-government and defend it every day against the paramilitaries who harass them. Of the university professor in Athens who creates a seminar outside the university framework for the promotion of critical thought. Of the book publisher in Barcelona who centres his activity on publishing books against capitalism. Of the friends in Porto Alegre who form a choir, just because they enjoy singing. Of the teachers in Puebla who confront police oppression to fight for a different type of school, a different type of education. Of the theatre director in Vienna who decides she will use her skills to open a different world to those who see her plays. Of the call centre worker in Sidney who fills all his vacant moments thinking of how to fight for a better society. Of the people of Cochabamba who come together and fight a battle against the government and the army so that water should not be privatised but subject to their own control. Of the nurse in Seoul who does everything possible to help her patients. Of the workers in Neuquén who occupy the factory and make it theirs. Of the student in New York who decides that university is a time for questioning

the world. Of the young man in Mexico City, who, incensed by the brutality of capitalism, goes to the jungle to organise armed struggle to change the world. Of the retired teacher in Berlin who devotes her life to the struggle against capitalist globalisation. Of the government worker in Nairobi who gives all her free time to the struggle against AIDS. Of the university teacher in Leeds who uses the space that still exists in some universities to set up a course on activism and social change. Of the old man living in an ugly block of flats on the outskirts of Beirut who cultivates plants on his windowsill as a revolt against the concrete that surrounds him. Of the young woman in Ljubljana, the young man in Florence, who, like so many others throughout the world, throw their lives into inventing new forms of struggle for a better world. Of the peasant in Huejotzingo who refuses to allow his small orchard to be annexed to a massive park of unsold cars. Of the group of homeless friends in Rome who occupy a vacant house and refuse to pay rent. Of the enthusiast in Buenos Aires who devotes all his great energies to opening new perspectives for a different world. Of the girl in Tokyo who says she will not go to work today and goes to sit in the park with her book, this book or some other. Of the young man in France who devotes himself to building dry toilets as a contribution to radically altering the relation between humans and nature. Of the telephone engineer in Jalapa who leaves his job to spend more time with his children. Of the woman in Edinburgh who, in everything she does, expresses her rage through the creation of a world of love and mutual support.

(*Crack*, 4–5)

‘Ordinary people,’ you remind us, are revolutionaries today, as they were yesterday, and will be again for a thousand tomorrows. This is a simple, profound truth that contains within it the critique of all vanguards, hierarchies, and exclusions. ‘In other words,’ you write, ‘social change is not produced by activists, however important activism may (or may not) be in the process. Social change is rather the outcome of the barely visible transformation of the daily activities of millions of people’ (*Crack*, 12). There is, indeed, an affinity – in the sense of a connection, a thread, and affection – between the people in the streets of Paris in May 1968, in the Zapatista communities, in the streets (again) of Seattle in 1999, and in many places in 2011. ‘We are everywhere,’ as the alter-globalization movement likes to say (Notes from Nowhere, 2003). ‘We are all gay in San Francisco,’ says Marcos. ‘You are all welcome,’ says the Occupy movement.

And what brings us together despite our differences, or, perhaps, because of them, is the intuition that the impersonal and pervasive structures that hem us in, that we breath and choke on every day, that look omnipotent and unchangeable, *can* be refused, can be cracked, and cannot stand without our labor and acquiescence.

The distinction between power-over and power-to that *Change* makes clear is one of the bases of our rebellions. It helps us prefigure the world we want right now, right here, in the heart of the world we do not want. Capital and states have power over us, but are powerless without us. We have the ability to *break* with them, to cause cracks in them, the power to bring them down and set off in different directions, if we have enough imagination and vision and love for it. Because we are not alone, we *are* everywhere, and increasingly so in an age that continues to break down the barriers to sharing our stories across time and space, and for free. We are the doers, you point out, when we refuse to be done to, and together find the ways to sustain our refusal.

As you noted, ‘Overcoming the capital-gatekeeper [the power that capital claims over us and often makes good from coercing our labor to clouding our minds] must involve the development of forms of doing that participate in all the richness of social doing’ (Holloway, 2002b: 204). In the same essay, you concluded:

How do we develop forms of doing that flow around the gatekeeper-capital and feed directly into a global sociality? We do it all the time. What is to be done, yes, but it must be grounded in what is being done already, and what is being done already is rich and wonderful. There are millions of different projects already in existence: small-scale projects in cities and in indigenous rural communities, projects to develop the creativity of the millions and millions (billions) of people that capital has simply spat out as irrelevant to its own expansion, large movements like the Zapatistas in Mexico or the landless peasants in Brazil, global projects constructed through the networks facilitated by the internet. A surge of movements, of people trying to develop their power against and beyond capital, a surge of which the iceberg-tip can be seen in Seattle, Genoa, Barcelona, Porto Alegre. A host of people trying to find a way of surviving without entering into the oppression of capital. A contradictory, often chaotic movement – but then that is the only way we can think of getting around capital, the gatekeeper to sociality.

(Holloway, 2002b: 206)

This is beautiful and true and empowering, and yet ... incomplete.

One of my reservations is that your position de-mobilizes the left (and if you want to problematize that term, we can), and that it persuades ordinary people – who should be free to decide – to avoid the state, to turn their back on it. But I see no warrant – politically *or* theoretically (and these can diverge, of course, at least in principle) – to do that. One of the most compelling critiques of *Change* for me was Hilary Wainwright’s aptly titled ‘Change the World by Transforming Power – Including State Power!’ (2004), with which I found myself in pretty deep agreement. On the issue of the state, I feel that your instinctive humility takes a back seat to your well-placed anger and rage over what states have done – and nearly always do – to people.

Is it not possible that capitalism is not equivalent to or co-extensive with the state (and here we touch on a large discussion which I’ll be brief about)? ‘Crack capitalism,’ you say; not ‘Crack the state.’ And I agree with this.

There are many kinds of state (yes, there is more than one state under capitalism, and *the* capitalist state exists mainly in our theories) that are repressive, leaving aside the obvious dictatorships of the last hundred years. Soviet-style communism and polyarchic capitalist democracy loom large among them. As autonomists, I know we don’t need to say much about the barbarity of the former, whose crime was that ‘[i]t separates the end from the means, and subordinates the means to the end. Any means are justified to reach the goal of communism’ (Holloway, 2002b: 201). And about capitalist democracies you have said much that is profound, and cautions us. But I want to complicate this by calling them ‘polyarchic’ capitalist democracies, by which I mean those formal democracies that are but façades – as in the United States, or Mexico, or Russia – in which formal democracy means virtually nothing because power-over is in the hands of a tight elite, whether national or transnational (Robinson, 1996). These are

states, as one Grenadian New Jewel activist put it, that take the form of the ‘Westminster hypocrisy ... where all you do is put your ballot in the box once every four years or so. Then you go away for four years until another politician comes asking for your vote again’ (Kelly and Sweeney, 1983, loosely paraphrased).

There is a third kind of state, though, one which is less polyarchic, less repressively tolerant, and more open to change, and that is where revolutionaries have the chance to come to power by the ballot box: Chile in 1970 (let’s not short-circuit the alternative futures that were opened up there by the closure to thought that claims Allende and the Popular Unity could never have succeeded, an argument that seriously underestimates the capacity of the Chilean people) was a precursor to the twenty-first century, just as May ’68 was to 2011.

The Latin American Pink Tide has opened up a second front in the global revolution we seek. The Venezuelan revolution, as you know, is more than Hugo Chávez and his sometimes invidious embrace of the enemy of his enemy – Ahmadinejad, Qaddafi, Assad. It is also the neighborhoods that decide their own budgetary priorities, the universities and schools that have opened their doors to the children of the barrios, the people who, against the great weight of the history of the Americas, refused to let a coup stand in 2002. A series of films tells us as much or more about real developments in Venezuela as do works of scholarship (for example, Bantley and O’Brian, 2003; Navarrete, 2009; Ross, 2008; Wayne and O’Neill, 2009). Will this revolution survive Chávez’s passing from the scene? Well, something will survive, and that is the measure of what this revolution, and the millions who are making it, have accomplished, and will defend.

In Bolivia, the people who created the *Movimiento al Socialismo* that elected Evo Morales are rewriting the script that colonialism, imperialism, and neo-liberal capitalism have imposed for five centuries. Indigenous modes of being and doing are making new/old cracks in this system that cannot be recaptured by critiques of the capitalist state; Arturo Escobar (2010) has traced these developments in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela with insight and a sense of wonder. I do not hold Evo Morales above criticism, of course, and as head of a still very capitalist state it is true that he and his advisors have made mistakes, grave ones, that have required popular mobilization to check. And that is how it should be. Why deny that deep social change can come as a result of both *electing* popular governments (however grand or local in scope) *and* forging social movements to push them from below and alongside to make good on the vision of their promises?

So there’s the question of what do you do once you’ve made a big enough crack in capitalism, for example in Bolivia after driving out Bechtel in 2003, or in Egypt after Mubarak was put in jail, or in Tunisia, or Libya, or hopefully soon in Syria, Palestine/Israel (which can be written as one word if not yet one state), or Greece, Yemen, Bahrain, ... You say that ‘There are two elements, then, in thinking about the possibility of revolutionary change’ (Holloway, 2002b: 199). If step 1 is to make a crack, and if a big enough crack produces a revolt – ‘¡Que se vayan todos!’ –, and step 2 is how to survive after taking step 1, to avoid being re-captured, co-opted, broken, or murdered, if ‘[r]evolt is inherent in our existence in an oppressive society, revolution refers to the question of how we maintain the impetus of revolt,’ and if, as you say, [t]hese elements are interwoven, independent and yet distinct’ (Holloway, 2002b: 199) – and I agree with all of these formulations – well, then what? I’d like to know what your advice would have been to

Bolivians in 2003, Tunisians on January 14, 2011, or Egyptians after February 11, 2011. What must the former do now to deepen the revolution they have started, or the latter do next to make their revolt a revolution? I know it's up to them, themselves, together, but what if you were a Bolivian peasant activist, an Egyptian blogger, a young person in Greece? What would *your palabra* be?

Then there's Marxism. A huge deal for you, I know. And for me, too. As a naïve 21-year-old college student in the autumn of 1976 who wanted to write a thesis on Sartre, I was told by Norman Birnbaum (like you, a devotee of the Frankfurt School) to first read the young Marx's Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts. And I well remember going to see him a couple of weeks later, with one big question: 'Can this be applied *now*?' As it happily turned out, it can, of course, and it can today as well, too. But the question remains *which* Marxism, which parts ring truest and serve best, in this case, for making revolutions? I prefer to speak now of 'movements for radical social change' rather than 'revolutions' *per se*, to mark the reality that the movements for deep social transformation for the better in this century differ so much from those of the last.

I'll confess, I do not relish reading about the labor theory of value. And you make a lot of it in both books (Chapters 4–6 in *Change*, and by coincidence Parts IV–VI in *Crack*). You lose too many readers in these dense pages, for the books can be read profitably from the point of view of changing the world without them. The world will, I think, rally faster and in greater numbers around the concept of 'justice' or 'a different sort of living' than it will around a call to 'abolish abstract labor' (or 'communism' for that matter). You can't use such a foundation to encompass a movement of the magnitude (or multitude!) that exists already and is needed tomorrow. It's not going to move the doings of people or nurture the political cultures of resistance that sustain us.

I just don't feel that your crucial insights into revolution need a foundation in the labor theory of value (or fetishization), and I think those chapters in both books are the least interesting and least necessary for the tasks at hand. Moreover, the very subtle and ingenious long discussion establishing that there is no 'outside' to capitalism advances the argument that this makes it possible to value other dimensions such as 'race'/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality. But is it helpful to do so? Is it true, or correct, or useful for revolutionary theory and practice? I'm skeptical, and suspect that the argument stretches too far the case that gender, sexuality, 'race'/ethnicity, or 'the other' have much to do with the theory, or any of Marx's work, for that matter. In other words, for me you ascribe too much to Marx, when he himself called for a ruthless critique of all existing thought. Today, it's a question of thinking in, against, and beyond Marx, but also in, against, and beyond you, dear John Holloway! Which I know is what you want.

By the time I finish reading the first volume of *Capital*, the parts per million of CO₂ in the atmosphere will be over 400 (science tells us that humans thrive at 350 ppm, and how will we get back to that?). So I'm not going to finish *Capital*. I've read novels and seen movies that are more useful to me, and by that I mean to say they have been very useful indeed. Your own thought, and that of the Zapatistas, of the alter-globalization and climate justice movements, also goes far beyond this (and we'd like a new book from you on all of this!).

There, I've said it. Take the best and leave the rest, freely and without regrets. Radical thought and practice today explode beyond Marxism to participatory democracy, occupation,

direct action, dignity, and the encounter. I believe – and see with my own eyes – that there are multiple meanings of revolution today: *not taking state power*, as the Zapatistas and, by now, many others, are doing so well; *taking state power* through elections, as the Pink Tide has done, and others will; *rising up and undoing the state power of dictatorships*, as the Arab Spring, especially in Tunisia and Egypt, has done. All are different from the old paths of armed struggle and one-party states that fell so far short of the dreams of those who made them. All involve people in movement, making community, thinking and acting together in new ways, and creating revolutionary spaces. All breathing what I take to be the spirit of the meaning of revolution and radical social change in the twenty-first century: let us change the world by not taking power violently.

There are *many* paths to a better future, one worthy of us and for our children, and depending on the situations that people face wherever they are, it should be no surprise that there will be different paths to the flowering of elected radicals from above pushed by uncompromising radical movements from below, or perhaps the other way around. These, to me, seem among the best ways forward (Foran, 2010).

In this moment we live on the same ground with some of the most beautiful and promising human experiences (for what else is a revolution?) that the history of struggle offers.

And the Arab Spring ...

And Occupy... everything.

Un abrazo fuerte,

John

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