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Change the World Without Taking Power

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My name is John Holloway; I live in Puebla in Mexico. I teach at the university there in the area of sociology. My main interest, I suppose, is the critique of capitalism and trying to think about how we can possibly get out of this dreadful society that we have created and create a more human world.

If you look at the experience of the last century, if you look at the experience of revolutionary governments in Russia, in China, in Cuba – but Cuba is a more complicated case – or if you look at the experience of reformist governments, of governments, which have got to power through elections, then I think universally it is a terrific disappointment, a terrific disillusionment. In no case, has a left-wing government been able to implement the sort of changes that the people who struggled for its victory wanted. In all cases, what has resulted is the reproduction of power relations, perhaps, but the reproduction of power relations, which exclude people, which reproduce material injustices, which reproduce a society that is not self-determining. It reproduces a society in which people themselves do not determine the development of the society. I

suppose my argument is, that you can analyze it historically: In Russia it happened for such and such a reason, in China it happened for such and such a reason, in Albania it happened for such and such a reason, in Cuba it happened for such and such a reason, in Brazil, etc. But then, there comes a point, when it is not enough to talk about it in terms of specific historical cases. Obviously, we have to try to generalize. The most obvious conclusion is that there is simply something wrong with the whole idea of trying to transform society through the state. The failure to transform society through the state has to do with the nature of the state itself, that the state is not just a neutral institution but a specific form of social relations that arises with the development of capitalism. And, that it is a form of social relations that is based upon the exclusion of people from power, that is based on the separation and fragmentation of people.

Changing the world without taking power means what it says it means, namely that we have to change the world, that is clear. And that we must not think of the struggle to change the world as being a struggle that is focused on the state and on taking state power. It is important to develop our own structures, our own ways of doing things. One central aspect of the argument is that it is important to make a distinction between two concepts of power. That the concept of power conceals an antagonism, an antagonism between our power to do things or our creative power, on the one hand; and the power to command, the instrumental power of capital, on the other hand. In other words, if you ask what power means, the most obvious answer is that power means our capacity to do things. This power, it seems to me, is always a social power, simply because the doing of one person always depends on the doing of others. It is very difficult for me to imagine a doing which would not be dependent on the doing of other people. It is clear

that our doing here at the moment depends on the doing of hundreds or thousands of people who created the technology we are using, who created the concepts we are using, etc.

Our power to do is always a social power, is always a collective power, our doing is always part of the social flow of doing. If we think of our power to do as a part of a social flow of doing – it is clear there are no clear divisions between the doing of one person and the doing of another. One flows into another. What one person has done becomes the precondition of the doing of others. But, in a way in which there are no clear distinctions, no clear identities, there are no clear dividing lines.

What happens then, under capitalism, is that this flow of doing is broken, because the capitalist comes along and says, "That which you have done is mine, I appropriate that, that is my property." And, since that what one person has done is the precondition of the doing of others, then the appropriation by the capitalist of that which has been done gives him the capacity to command the doing of others, to rule over the doing of others. Through that, the social power to do becomes broken, it becomes transformed into its opposite, which is the power of the capitalist to command the doing of others.

Capitalism is basically the process of breaking this social flow of doing, breaking the sociality of doing and breaking therefore our power to do and transforming it into a power over, into something which is alien from us. So I think that we have to think about our struggle not as the struggle to take power, which would mean taking *their* power, but as the struggle to build up *our* power to do, which is inevitably a social power.

It is important, to see that in this struggle there are two very different concepts of power, and that each concept has its own logic, a very distinct logic. The logic of capital is a logic of command, it is a logic of hierarchy, it is a logic of fragmentation. It is a logic, which denies subjectivity. It is a logic which objectifies the subject. Our logic is just the contrary, it is the logic of coming together, it is a logic of recovering the subjectivity, which is denied by capital. Subjectivity not as an individual subjectivity, but as a social subjectivity. It means two very different forms of thinking, two very different forms of action.

For us, trying to think how to change society means having confidence in our own form of action, confidence in the self-critical development of our own forms of thought and action. Or, another way of putting it, is to say, if we think of the struggle to change society as class struggle, then it is fundamental to see this struggle as being asymmetrical. And, once we start to reproduce *their* forms and once we start to think of our struggle as being the mirror image of *their* struggle, then all that we are doing is reproducing the power of capital within our own struggles.

The revolution I have in mind has to be thought of as a question rather than an answer. On the one hand, it is clear that we need some basic transformation of society; on the other hand, it is clear that the way that we have tried over the last century to transform society through the state has failed. So that leaves us with the conclusion that we have to try it in some other way. We can't just give up the idea of revolution. I think what has happened in recent years is that people have come to the conclusion that because the transformation of society through the state did not work therefore revolution is impossible. My argument is just the contrary, that in fact revolution is more obviously urgent than ever. But that means rethinking how we can do it, trying to find other ways. But at the

moment, at this stage, this means posing the question and trying to think how on earth do we develop the question. I think it is important to think that revolution is a question rather than an answer, because the revolutionary process in itself has to be understood as a process of asking, as a process of moving out, not of telling people what the answers are, but actually as a process of involving people in a movement of self-determination.

This is a very general answer obviously. I think we can fill in details much more by looking at what is actually happening, by looking at struggles that are going on. Not just copying them necessarily, but looking at them critically, looking at the way in which certain movements have been trying to develop autonomous forms of action, the way in which they have been developing the concept of dignity, the way in which they have been breaking down the separations between politics and economics, the way in which they have been developing new organizational forms.

For me, the Zapatista uprising has been of an enormous importance, the uprising in 1994 and the whole experience of the last ten years. I think this for two reasons: Partly, because they rose up, they rebelled; they revolted at a time when it seemed there was no longer any space for revolt in modern society, in modern capitalism. But it is much more than that. It is also the fact that they have proposed a rethinking of the whole concept of rebellion, the whole concept of what revolution or revolt means. And I think part of that is precisely the question of proposing a different logic, a different language, a different temporality, a different spatiality, which is not symmetrical to the language and temporality of capital and of the state.

For example, after the initial uprising, one of the first important events, I suppose, was the *diálogo de San Andrés*, the dialogue

between the Mexican government and the Zapatistas in San Andrés, this town in Chiapas. And normally, one would think of a dialogue, a negotiation as a symmetrical process between two sides. And I think one of the important things was that the Zapatistas from the beginning made clear: First of all that they weren't going to negotiate and, secondly, that this wasn't a symmetrical process. That it wasn't a symmetrical process they underlined, for example, by their dress, by insisting on wearing their own traditional dress, by insisting, at least in one occasion, on using their own language, and not simply bowing to the use of Spanish. One of the interesting points that came up was the question of time, for example. At one point, when the two sides, the government and the Zapatistas, had reached a provisional agreement or proposal, then the Zapatistas said, "Fine, we have to take this to our people and we'll have to discuss it." And the government said, "No, you have to decide, we need an answer within two days." And the Zapatistas said, "Nonsense, you have to understand that we have a different time, and that we have processes of discussions." And the government representative said: "How can you say, you have got a different time? I see that you are wearing a Japanese watch, the same as I am." And Comandante Tacho responded that these people from the government think that time means clock. "For us that is not the meaning of 'time', for us 'time' is different." And they took about two months to give their response.

But precisely it's the awareness from the beginning that rebellion meant confidence in their own structures, confidence in their own sense of time, confidence in their own sense of space. And this idea of "time" for example is very much tied up with the whole question of democratic structures, the whole question of insisting that decisions have to be reached through a process of community discussion. Because if you insist that decisions have to be reached

through a process of community discussion, then obviously this takes a lot of time, it is just a different sense of time.

So that this asymmetry, this lack of symmetry between the logic of domination on the one hand and the logic of revolt on the other hand is something which is absolutely fundamental for the Zapatista movement from the beginning. And this is emphasized time and time again in their communiqués, in their use of stories, in their use of jokes, in their use of poetry, etc. And all of those things which seemed at first to be a kind of decoration, secondary to the process of revolt, you gradually come to realize that, in fact, no, it is central to the revolt itself that they are proposing and insisting upon a different way of conceiving the world and a different way of conceiving relations between people.

Whereas the traditional concept of revolution, I think, was very much based on a military metaphor, on the idea, that you have got a clash between two armies essentially; and that, in order to defeat the enemy, then basically you accept the methods of the enemy. Just one army to defeat the other army, which is organized in exactly the same way as the other army. And, I think it is very important that the Zapatistas break with this, and that they say, "No, that is not it!" The way to revolt, the way to rebel is to develop a language and a way of doing things, that the state simply does not understand. And they have done that consistently over and over again in the last ten years.

Very often we think of the problem of revolution, in terms of how to destroy capitalism. I think that we have to break with this, simply because if we think in terms of how we can destroy capitalism, we very quickly convince ourselves that it is impossible. Because to think about destroying capitalism is to imagine capitalism as this great big monster that exists, this huge big

monster with its armies, with its education system, with its control of the media, with its control of material resources, etc. And here are we, a little lost, how can we possibly destroy this big monster? And my argument is that we have to get away from this metaphor of destruction and to think of it in other ways.

Capitalism exists not because we created it in the nineteenth century or in the eighteenth century or whenever. Capitalism exists today, only because we created it today. If we don't create it tomorrow, then it won't exist. It appears to have an independent duration, but in fact that is not true. In fact, capital depends from one day to the next on our creation of capital. If tomorrow we all stay in bed, then capitalism will cease to exist. If we don't go and create it, then it won't exist any more. If we begin to think of capitalism in terms of how we stop creating it, if we think about the question of revolution in terms of how we stop creating it, then this doesn't solve the problems. It doesn't mean that capitalism will actually disappear tomorrow – or, who knows, but perhaps it won't disappear tomorrow. But if we think of revolution in terms of how to stop creating capitalism, then somehow we dissolve the image of capitalism as this huge monster that is opposed to us. And we can begin to open up possibilities, a new hope and a new way of thinking about revolution, a new way of thinking about transforming society.

An ideal society would be self-creating. If it is self-creating, if it is self-determining; then, in a sense, it doesn't make sense to project an ideal organization, because the ideal organization would be created by the society itself. And, the self-creating society might decide one day to live a different society from the society it lived yesterday.

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