

# Capital & Class

<http://cnc.sagepub.com/>

---

## **The state as a contradiction**

Mabel Thwaites Rey

*Capital & Class* 2005 29: 33

DOI: 10.1177/030981680508500110

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://cnc.sagepub.com/content/29/1/33.citation>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

Conference of Socialist Economists

**Additional services and information for *Capital & Class* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://cnc.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://cnc.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

argument appeal to anti-intellectual and anti-vanguardist trends?

These are questions without obvious answers. To find them, I think that we should take seriously the methodological principle by which categories of thought are understood as manifestations of the reality to which they refer. Thus, we may interpret the success of this book as an expression of the present fragmentation of collective struggles, as well as of the

disillusionment of a whole generation of political activists with the bureaucratic and dogmatic practices of the traditional left.

---

### Notes

1. All page references are from John Holloway (2002) *Change the World Without Taking Power: The Meaning of Revolution Today*.

---

## The state as a contradiction

### Mabel Thwaites Rey

In these notes, I want to discuss some topics related to the concepts of state and power that John Holloway proposes. Holloway says that 'the objective of taking power inevitably involves an instrumentalisation of the struggle', and that '[o]nce the logic of power is adopted, the struggle for power is already lost'.

However, he also warns that things are not immutable but that, at the same time, they express their negation. But if there are no identities, why, in that case, *is* the struggle for power always a vehicle for instrumentalisation? If there is always a contradiction between what is and what is not, and if this contradiction is what allows us to think about change, why is it, then, that the objective of defeating power *is* inevitably a way to the instrumenta-lisation of every struggle?

I do not think that by saying we are going to 'eliminate' power by the simple mandate of our will, we can resolve the multiplicity of issues that this involves. Because if this decree of our will is really relevant, it must necessarily be

collective; and where there is a collective, there is a need to assume the disputes that the non-desired manifestations of power imply. If clear rules and mechanisms with which to resolve conflicts are not created, these conflicts will eventually be resolved somehow, but without any guarantee of respect for the collective will.

Holloway proposes the concept of 'anti-power' as a way of resolving the complex question of power. This means that power over others can be dissolved through the decision of an autonomous will, which refuses to be subjugated, and refuses to reproduce the existing order. The question seems more complex than the solution he proposes.

How do we build a non-power society in the midst of one in which the real power not only exists, but also oppresses us? Holloway's solution is to ignore this power.

Understanding what the struggle for power means, and the enormous perils that it entails, is a very good starting-point for thinking about new forms of democratic, participative and horizontal ways of political articulation. But the crucial problem is not yet solved: how to confront, in an effective and concrete way, such a 'powerful power'? The

opposite of power is not necessarily anti-power; it may well be simple impotence. And the scream of the oppressed that cannot be potent may be even more frustrating.

How to go from individual rejection; from the oppressed scream of each person; from the act of hurling away the alarm clock that calls us each morning to the slavery of tedious work, to a concrete and common action, capable of expressing the disruptive power in the rejection of this oppressive system? How can a scream, a rejection, tie us together in a socially useful way, i.e. with relevant effects for the whole?

There is a problem in Holloway's approach. The neoliberal hegemony has been accompanied by high levels of despair with regard to political activity (reformist, revolutionary or anarchist). This has been a clear victory for neoliberalism. The loss of confidence in political action has strengthened the world of capital for decades. Not in vain have the beneficiaries of capitalism been fighting to reduce the role of the state as an articulator of wider social interests. Holloway states, correctly, that

The fact that [the state] exists as a particular or rigidified form of social relations means, however, that the relation between the state and the reproduction of capitalism is a complex one: it cannot be assumed, in functionalist fashion, either that everything that the state does will necessarily be in the best interests of capital, nor that the state can achieve what is necessary to secure the reproduction of capitalist society. The relation between the state and the reproduction of capitalist social relations is one of trial and error. (2002: 143-144)

This point is crucial. If the state is one form of a contradictory social relation, its actions and its very morphology reflect this contradiction. This is also expressed in workers' battles for better living conditions. Since the state is more than the mere expression of capital's logic, it should not be forgotten that is in the state apparatus that the complex relations of force that specify the capitalist social relation understood as a whole, materialise. Therefore, the form taken by the capitalist state cannot be a matter of indifference to workers. It is not the same thing to have protective labour laws as it is to have job flexibility. It is not the same to have legally-guaranteed social security benefits as to leave them to the movement of market forces. Workers' historical achievements should be defended, not with reference to a mythical welfare state that has never trespassed capitalist frontiers, but with reference to the social dimension that should resolve the interests of the majority.

It should be noted that the state is synonymous with repression but, to paraphrase Holloway, it-is-is-not-and-may-be (is-is-not-and-could-be) protection for the weak too. The rich have always wanted 'less state', to pay less 'common expenses', and to invest the minimum in legitimating their dominant place within the social structure. Therefore, it is this contradictory dimension of the state that should be recovered. Fighting in and against the state at the same time is fighting to eliminate its repressive forms, and to widen what it has of collective sociability. Of course, Holloway would say, this is impossible because the state *is* a form of social relations.

This line of reasoning ends up in a cul-de-sac: if the state *is* a monolithically-

defined form, then we are falling into the thing-ness that destroys the contradictory dimension whose existence Holloway notes within capitalist social relations, and which allows us to think about change and rupture with the present. Following this rationale, we can say that, as is any form, the state is and is-not.

Tearing away that which is-not, taking possession of it, snatching it in the popular interest, should be part of the struggle: it cannot be left outside. Because far from avoiding, as Holloway says, being trapped by the logic of power, to turn our back on this struggle is to glorify it as an immovable thing-ness.

### **Holloway on power and the ‘state illusion’**

#### **Atilio A. Boron**

According to Holloway, ‘the nucleus of the novelty of Zapatismo is the project of changing the world without taking power’ (Holloway, 2001a: 174). In a penetrating literary metaphor, the Zapatistas proclaimed that ‘it is not necessary to conquer the world. It is enough to create it anew!’ Holloway argues that the innovation of Zapatismo allows the left to overcome the ‘state illusion’, a doctrinal relic linked to a state-centred conception of revolution in which the latter was assimilated to ‘the conquest of state power and the transformation of society by the state’ (ibid: 174). For Holloway, the classic Marxist controversy that contrasted reform with revolution hides, despite apparent differences, a fundamental agreement regarding the state-centred character of the revolutionary process. From there, he asserts that ‘the biggest contribution of the Zapatistas has been the breaking of the link between revolution and control of the state’ (ibid: 174). His reasoning not only has an undeniable merit of its own—inasmuch as the problems to which he refers are of great theoretical and

practical transcendence—but it also illustrates a range of concerns and theoretical approaches common to a good part of the alternative and progressive thinking of the twenty-first century. In a previous work, this author had dealt extensively with the subject (Holloway, 1997). ‘The revolt of dignity’—he said on that occasion—‘can not aspire to take the power of the state’ given that ‘the rejection of state power is simply an extension of the idea of dignity’. And he completed his argument in the following way:

The revolt of dignity can only aspire to abolish the state, or more immediately, to develop alternative forms of social organisation and strengthen the (anti) power of the anti-state. ... The problem of revolutionary politics, then, is not the taking of power, but the development of ways of political articulation that would oblige those who retain state office to obey the people. (Holloway, 1997: 24, my translation)

Let us briefly examine the various possible objections to Holloway’s assertion. In the first place, attention should be drawn to an ignored feature of fundamental importance in his