**John Holloway's *Change the World Without Taking Power***

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[Translator’s note: The following review of John Holloway's *Change the World Without Taking Power* appears as an "Addenda" to Chapter 13 of *Global: Biopower and Struggles in a Globalized Latin America*, a book co-authored by Antonio Negri and Giuseppe Cocco's (Italian political scientist currently residing in Brazil) and distributed in Spanish by Paidos, Argentina. Due to the nature of Negri's writing and certain ambiguities made possible by the Spanish in which it first appears, this translation remains preliminary and we would welcome any suggestions for changes. Translation by El Kilombo Intergaláctico.]

*Change the World Without Taking Power* by John Holloway is a beautiful but strange book. Its paradox consists of the fact that, in his critique of Italian *operaismo* (the method of which is the basis of our book), Holloway considers dialectical Marxism (what he calls “the problem of form”) as predisposed to assume the fetishistic character of the world (this is his reality principle), and at the same time as capable of proposing an antagonistic foundation for action. In practice, however, Holloway considers reality only from its fetishistic side while critiquing *operaismo*—attacking it for having employed dialectics—exclusively from its antagonistic side. With this in mind, where is the principle for action within Holloway’s perspective?

Let us develop this thought. The words that Holloway uses are very harsh. According to him, *operaismo* would be a “radical democratic” theory and consequently (according to the traditional polemic), neither working class nor revolutionary because it is incapable of understanding Marxist dialectics as the discovery of the radical negativity of the world. But Holloway belongs only partially to this tradition—one towards which he shows much respect, if at times irreverence. Here we will see how.Holloway presumes all figures of power as solely and exclusively fetishistic figures. Each moment and each form in which power is expressed, even if it is in an antagonistic manner, never achieves its independence due to the effect of its fetishistic form; proletarian potentiality always remains homologous [to capitalist *potestas*]. Well gentlemen, there is nothing to be done, the universe is black. If you are a communist and you rise to power, you become (for this very reason) a fascist. Only the refusal is a revolutionary moment.

Beyond the refusal, beyond “the scream” of the oppressed, reality is completely thingified, dialectics triumphs and its eventual negativity is affirmed. (Allow us to observe the ambiguous similarity that is revealed here between the Lucakacian figures and all the postmodern tonalities of negativity: the marginal in the style of Derrida, “naked life” according to Agamben, etc.). But Holloway never speaks of these; perhaps he does not know them sufficiently.

In addition, Holloway demonstrates a rather ambiguous relation to Foucault: he is fascinated by but simultaneously incapable of incorporating within the horizon of Foucaultian differences (better said, in the indifferent horizon of “resistances”) the productive potential of antagonism (in Foucault’s own language “the production of subjectivity”). In the face of the articulated dynamic of Foucaultian resistances, Holloway puts forward the pure reaffirmation of absolute antagonism, the “scream” of the exploited. Note Bene: Holloway confronts the degradation that the concept
of the dialectic suffers in the tradition of Engels and in the late Soviet Marxist perspective, where it practically becomes something of a natural law; despite this, Holloway believes he can liberate himself of these difficulties in purely negative terms. We will see the political effects of this choice further on.

Let us go on to examine Holloway’s critique of operaismo. What Holloway will not accept in any case is the constitutive power that operaismo attributes to the force of labor and, in general, to the class struggle. Holloway interprets this attribute [of a constituent power] as belonging to a constituted power that functions so as to taint the value of labor and the figure of political liberty. It is evident then, according to this perspective, that the concept of exploitation can hardly be posed. Holloway’s polemic extends against the concept of self-valorization [autovalorizzazione] (as he finds it elaborated in the work of Harry Cleaver). This said, one has to recognize that Holloway is headed down the wrong path—he is getting ahead of himself: here, the fetishistic form of Marxian dialectics (interpreted in the manner of Backhaus and taken up again by Holloway) suffocates all dialectical elements, especially those which remain antagonistic (and it matters little that this is not Holloway’s intention). All that remains is fetishism, that is, a tragic form of the real that can never be reclaimed. To reclaim it would be the absolute event, “The Revolution!”

Let’s return to the critique of operaismo. Here, the contradiction that was mentioned above becomes apparent in its entirety. Holloway attacks the constituent perspective of operaismo by characterizing it as “functionalist.” But functionalism, as we understand it, avoids the contradictions of capitalism; it neutralizes them and it takes on dialectics as the sublimation of contradictions and differences. Functionalism is a heresy to materialism because it uses dialectics linearly, glorifying within it only the element of resolution. With respect to this presumed functionalism, operaismo simply turns this picture upside down; the antagonistic pressure of the force of labor (exactly because dialectics was pushed aside) does not avoid but rather deepens the contradictions. This deepening of contradictions has two effects. The first is to accentuate the consistency of the subjects (i.e. labor force, proletariat, class, multitude) and to impress upon this subjective reality a continual process of metamorphosis, a dispositif of ontological transformation. Second, and consequently, there arises the effect of pushing the subject (labor force, proletariat, class, multitude) each time further outside of capital—exodus is precisely the result of this process. It is a process nonetheless, a struggle, not a utopia, an indefinite lineage, not one that has been concluded, real, not dreamed.

For the above reasons, what Holloway cannot accept is this: the dialectic, which is a weapon of capital, simultaneously becomes in his hands a death sentence for labor. We are then victims of this unsolvable tonality, that is, unsolvable from its own interior—a solution that can come only from outside. Our objection: if this were true, if these were the given conditions, the revolution would not be constituent power, but rather a mystical event.

In other places it becomes very clear that in his insistence on the impossibility of (or better yet, on the incorrect procedure which allows) identifying elements or dispositifs of “constituent power” within the “refusal of work”—that is, elements of liberation within the process of the emancipation from work—Holloway obstructs any dynamic perspective of the class struggle and thus bangs his head up against the so-called concrete history of socialism. That is, Holloway
cannot avoid giving the class struggle an institutional figure. However, it is obvious that the class struggle (as Holloway would like it) is a constituent process that can never come to an end. But our problem is not to bring it to an end or to close it. Neither is our problem that of leading this struggle to some kind of naturalist figure, or to the repetition of the same. Rather, our effort is that of developing, articulating, metamorphosing class relations in new consistencies of the potential of the proletariat (or of the multitude), of the different polarities of class struggle.

The misfortune of Holloway’s reasoning lies in his radical rejection of all structural and ontological relations between reform and revolution. This becomes all the more dangerous today, the very moment at which sovereignty is no longer able to remain concentrated in the unity of power but rather must accept duality, and thus the relation between movements and “governance,” at the very nature and fundamental horizon of the institutions themselves. This is as Gramsci (not Togliatti’s Gramsci, the real Gramsci—the Leninist) had already, to the contrary, taught us.

It is beyond doubt that Holloway’s position has the merit of no longer attempting to simply vindicate the dialectic [dialectical Marxist] tradition but rather promoting the fundamental effectiveness of all communist alternatives. There is, in reality something very Zapatista about Holloway’s discourse. Yet, we think that what Holloway calls the “problem of form,” or the problem of fetishism, is reduced in his discourse to more of a moral or ethical category than that of a critique or a politics. It was already difficult to be in agreement with the analogous theoretical and political positions produced by the dialectical philosophy of the communist left of proletarian Europe during the 1930’s, but it is impossible to accept these positions within the biopolitical reality of the central and/or peripheral countries of the 21st century, that is, during the century of Empire. No one can deny fetishization—ontological corruption and its practical consequences—it both effects and negates the classed subject, in this way making the dream of a “rebirth” all the less possible.

*Operaismo* owes its dignity to the fact of never having dissolved the concept of revolution within that of reform; it owes its efficacy, on the other hand, to the fact of always having resolved the concept of reform within that of revolution, and also to the fact of having understood that within this nexus [reform–revolution], the autonomy/independence of the proletarian subject that was formed in the relations of production was rejoined with the exodus from the relations of capital. That is, this subject [labor] has the capacity to destroy, along with exploitation, the very existence of classes themselves.

Holloway’s line represents the best of the opposition to attempts by a certain institutional Latin American left to flatten within the categories of nation and development the relation between biopower and biopolitical potential. Yet, it remains limited by its negative dialectical framework. Negativity is not just a mere “scream;” it is rather, desire, a multitudinary necessity to continuously affirm joy, peace, and communism.