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Change the World by Cracking Capitalism? A Critical Encounter between John Holloway and Simon Susen

JOHN HOLLOWAY & SIMON SUSEN

Simon Susen: It would be useful if you could start by saying a few words about your last book, *Crack Capitalism*.¹ In what context did you write it? What was the purpose of the book? To what extent does it differ from your previous works?

John Holloway: As I say in the first few pages, I see *Crack Capitalism* as being the daughter of *Change the World Without Taking Power*.² The earlier book triggered many discussions, not only in the universities but also amongst activist groups. The reactions were very mixed. Some people just dismissed it, saying “What absolute rubbish! Of course we can’t change the world without taking power!”. Many others, however, said “Right, that’s fantastic—it’s just what we’ve been thinking all along. But *how* do we do it? Yes, we do *not* want to take power, but how do we *change* the world *without* taking power?”.

The new book is really an attempt to advance with this argument, by suggesting that the only way we can think of changing the world is by changing it *interstitially*, that is, by changing it piece by piece. Interstices should not be misinterpreted as states; rather, they should be conceived of as *non-state spaces or moments*. They should be understood as *cracks*: cracks rather than interstices, cracks rather than autonomous spaces; because

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cracks *move*, cracks are *unstable*, cracks are constantly *on the move*, always *opening up* again, joining up with other cracks. Not only is this the only viable way in which we can make sense of radical social transformation, but, in addition, it corresponds to what is actually happening at the moment. Thus, we can think of a crack as being *a space of negation and creation, refusal and creation*, when we say “no, we won’t accept the logic of capitalist relations here in this space and this moment, we are going to do things according to a different logic”.

You can see this all over the place. You can see “*big*” examples, such as the Zapatistas uprising in 1995, in Chiapas, Mexico.³ And you can think of, say, “*medium*” examples, where people get together and assert “we are going to go in a different direction, we are going to develop a social centre, or a cooperative, or simply an area of activity where we do *not* follow the logic of capital”. Or you can see it, more generally, in *everyday life*, when people say “no, really, I’m not going to sell my soul to money”, and when, as a consequence, they decide to do things in a different way. So the book is really an attempt to explore this further, to reflect upon how we can conceive of these cracks and of their overall importance, but also, in some detail, upon both the difficulties and the possibilities arising from their existence.

Susen: Fair enough, but how does this view differ from the perspective put forward in your previous book? More specifically, in *Change the World Without Taking Power*, you were concerned with the complex ways in which *power* operates in our *everyday lives*. To what extent does your current conception of power, underlying the argument of *Crack Capitalism*, differ from the account of power you developed in your previous writings? It seems to me that your approach to power has always been inextricably linked to a critical concern with “the ordinary”, correct? For instance, you have been deeply suspicious of the view that “revolution is just about conquering the state or winning an election”, haven’t you?

Holloway: Yes, I have. We have to think of breaking the state in terms of *everyday practices*. How does this relate to the previous book? I don’t know. I always have a slight fear that I may end up saying the same thing over and over again. In *Crack Capitalism*, I have tried to take up, and develop, themes from my previous work. It is true that one issue remains important to me, namely the question of how, in our *everyday lives*, we can *break* with the logic of capitalism and, by so doing, invent *different* ways of doing things *within*, but ultimately *beyond*, the existing system.

Susen: If you don’t mind, let’s talk about the Special Issue on *Crack Capitalism*, which has recently been published in the *Journal of Classical Sociology (JCS)*.⁴ Can you say a few words about the idea of publishing the Special Issue in a “mainstream” journal, such as *JCS*, rather than in one of the Anglophone Marxist journals, such as *Radical Philosophy* or *Historical Materialism*?⁵

Holloway: With Marxist—or, more generally, left-wing—discussions, there is always a danger of getting stuck in a *ghetto*. I think it’s important to try and *break out* of that, to try moving into different areas, to experiment with different contexts. So when the idea came up—whether it was yours or mine, I think it was yours—I was delighted. I thought “Great!”,

fully aware of the fact that such a project poses a major challenge: it creates a *broader and more diverse* forum for discussion. In this sense, it pushes me to try to explain what I'm talking about...

Susen: ...to a wider audience?

Holloway: Yes, to a wider audience.

Susen: Do you think that the way your work is perceived in Britain is different from the ways in which it is interpreted and used in, say, Australia, North America, or Central and South America? If so, do you notice these differences when you give talks and discuss your ideas with people in particular "national" contexts?

Holloway: I don't really notice the difference, although I suppose one of the great things about moving to Latin America was the feeling that my ideas found a much deeper and wider resonance. By this I mean that I could talk about what I was thinking and then receive a much *stronger response* than in Europe. Yet, I don't want to exaggerate, because I think it has been growing in Europe.

Susen: What do you mean by "stronger"? Do you mean "more engaged", "more interested", "more serious", "more in-depth"?

Holloway: Possibly "more engaged", but also stronger in terms of numbers, and stronger in the sense of feeling that a lot of people were more or less on the same wave length. And I guess stronger in the sense that, in very big areas, many people share my view of what universities are, or should be, about. I mean that universities are, and should be, about thinking how we *break the system*. These assumptions do exist in Europe, but they tend to be more marginal.

Susen: As you probably know, the *Journal of Classical Sociology* tends to publish articles on the continuing relevance of classical sociological thought by tracing the roots of contemporary social theory in the writings of influential thinkers such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel. Would you say that your work has been influenced by the so-called "classical figures" in sociology, that is, not only by Marx but *also* by Weber, Durkheim, and Simmel?

Holloway: Not consciously, although I'm sure these scholars have influenced my work—for instance, in the sense that Weber influenced Lukács, and Lukács has obviously influenced me, but *not* in the sense of any *conscious* or *direct* relation between these "classical sociologists" and myself.

Susen: What strikes me when reading your books and articles is that the thinkers who have had the most significant impact upon your work are scholars such as Karl Marx, György Lukács, Ernst Bloch, and Theodor W. Adorno. Is that right?

Holloway: Yes, they are the key figures in my work.

Susen: Talking about Adorno, what do you make of recent developments in critical theory? For example, if you consider the works of influential thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, how would you assess their contributions?

Holloway: I think I don't find them particularly interesting.

Susen: So are you of the opinion that, at least in relation to your own work, their contributions are not really worth engaging with?

Holloway: I guess that's right.

Susen: OK, fair enough. In *Crack Capitalism*, you emphasize the importance of *agenda-setting* in general and of *autonomous agenda-setting* in particular. Am I right to assume that you suggest that one of the most fatal mistakes of the political left, including the radical left, has been to follow the agendas dictated by capital? If so, can you elaborate on this point? Why do you think it is crucial that the left takes on the challenge of setting its own agenda?

Holloway: There is always the danger that the left ends up simply *reacting* to capital. This pattern of reaction, however, locks us into the existing system. Thus, we have to break this agenda by saying "we can create a different world, and we *are* going to create a different world, so let *them* chase after *us*". In fact, it seems to me that this is what happens: capital is a constant *process* of trying to chase after *us*, of trying to appropriate *our* creativity, of trying to co-opt *our* revolts. We should be conscious of this process and, hence, of the fact that *we* are the people who shape the world.

Susen: Another aspect that strikes me about your last book is that it stresses the *sociological importance* of "*the ordinary*", which is a dimension upon which we touched at the beginning of this interview. The emphasis you put on the ontological significance of ordinary social life reminds me of some key concerns examined by the French sociologist Luc Boltanski, who, on a number of occasions, has insisted that "*il faut prendre les gens au sérieux*" ("we need to take people seriously").⁶ I think it would be fair to suggest that this normative concern is no less important in your work than it is in Boltanski's studies. In other words, you appear to share the view that it is vital to take people seriously and, in this sense, recognize that they are, at least potentially, *autonomous* and *critical* entities, rather than—largely heteronomous and unreflective—cultural dupes, who do not really know, let alone understand, what is going on in the world. On this account, the traditional divide between *scientists* and *experts*, on the one hand, and *laypersons* and *ordinary people*, on the other, describes a somewhat dangerous epistemological "division of labour". Would you nevertheless accept that the kind of knowledge you produce as a researcher—that is, as a critical sociologist, critical theorist, or university professor—is somewhat different from the kind of knowledge that we use in our everyday interactions? Or are you implying that there are no epistemological distinctions to be drawn between specific types of knowledge production? To my mind, this is not only an

epistemological question, but also a *normative* issue. Put differently, would you agree that the kind of knowledge you produce in your articles and books, as well as in your talks and seminars, is qualitatively different from the sort of knowledge that we generate, and draw upon, in our everyday interactions?

Holloway: I don't know if it's different. I think that what we are doing, and what we should be doing, is, above all, *listening*. Listening permits us to understand the rebellion that is ingrained in everyday life. Moreover, I suppose that listening is a form of *intervention*, rather than simply a mode of passive reflection. When we are listening we are trying to *develop* different themes. I guess one metaphor that springs to mind is the idea of *playing jazz*. By this I mean something which we are doing all the time: namely, taking our themes from *everyday rebellion*. And we try to magnify it, develop it, and possibly render it more coherent, in order to give it more force in one way or another. In any case, I see it in that way, rather than in terms of a clear-cut separation between one and the other.

Susen: Do you agree with Marx's dictum that there would be no point in producing scientific knowledge if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided? Or do you disagree with this view? Or, perhaps, you think that it's just an orthodox misreading of Marx to assume that we should privilege science over common sense...

Holloway: I think it's an orthodox misreading. It seems to me that, for Marx, the important thing is to *break* the fetishized appearances generated by capitalism. The breaking of these fetishized appearances is based not only on a process of *critical reflection*, but also on a process of *experience*. I believe he sees it in those terms. Hence, his critique is, above all, a critique of those who create conceptual systems on the basis of *fetishized appearances*. That's what critical science is all about. I don't think, however, Marx suggests that "people are lost completely in these fetishized ways". Not at all!

Susen: Thus, the way in which you read him does not have anything to do with the famous "false consciousness" thesis.

Holloway: That's correct.

Susen: Talking about "people", in your book you defend the notion that the "human world" is fundamentally different from what we may refer to as the "natural world" or the "physical world". In relation to this point, you endorse the assumption that there is something *distinctive* about *humanity*, that is, something *distinctive* about *human actors*. What, however, do you reply to those who maintain that the boundaries between "the human" and "the non-human" are increasingly blurred? For example, Bruno Latour—who, as you know, has had a considerable impact on recent developments in the philosophy of science—contends that we should abandon traditional conceptual oppositions, such as "the human" *versus* "the non-human" or "the cultural" *versus* "the natural". These antinomies appear to have come under attack for good reason. What would you say to scholars such as Latour? Would you insist that you still want to draw these "classical" distinctions? Do you advocate the—arguably

anthropocentric—view that there is something distinctive or unique about the human species, something which makes us “special”?

Holloway: I think we have to continue to draw this distinction in the sense that we have to assume our own *responsibility* as human beings. If the world is in danger, if life—that is, not just human life, but also animal life—is in danger, this is *because of human activity*, not because of pigs or because of horses. And *we* are the ones who have to reflect upon and change the situation. If we are talking about radical change, if we are talking about revolution, we need to draw a distinction between humans and cows. I don’t think cows are likely to bring about some radical social transformation. It’s really up to *us*.

Susen: Would you nonetheless be willing to accept that human beings have more in common with animals than most intellectuals, particularly those influenced by the Enlightenment, used to think?

Holloway: Yes.

Susen: Let’s take the example of *culture*. Arguably, the so-called *Geistes-* and *Kulturwissenschaften* are based on the assumption that culture is a distinctively human characteristic. Now we know, however, that some animals *also* develop a sense of culture, because, in some cases, the same animal species can develop different life forms in different environments. In short, some non-human life forms appear to contain some *culturally variable*—that is, habitualized and context-dependent—behavioural patterns.

Holloway: Sure, I am quite happy with this argument. The problem, however, is how we, as human beings, *transform culture*. We may assume that ants have some sort of culture, but I have never heard of ants rising up against their Queen!

Susen: Fair enough.

Holloway: ...whereas I think we do.

Susen: By the way, just out of interest: what do you make of animal rights movements?

Holloway: I think one of the disasters of capitalism is that it leads to the massacre of non-human forms of life, that is, to the absolutely dreadful massacre of other species. I believe that we have to stop this and that we have to stop all this for our own sake, because our environment is the basis of our own life. I suppose we have to stop all this, for the sake of both human and non-human forms of life. It is, however, *our* responsibility, our responsibility as *humans*.

Susen: Are you implying that the systematic destruction of our natural environment is due to capitalism, rather than due to industrialism? So-called socialist countries have also contributed significantly to the destruction of the planet. Of course, you may contend that they are, or were, not really “socialist”, but...

Holloway: ...exactly, I would say they are, or were, not really “socialist”. Anyway, I think *capitalism*, rather than industrialism, is the *main problem*. To say it’s all due to the rise of industrialism doesn’t tell you anything about the frenetic and uncontrolled dynamic of the capitalist system. One can imagine a *different* sort of social organization, in which people decide they still want to have some sort of industry. That wouldn’t necessarily have to be terribly destructive. It is in capitalism where you are confronted with this kind of frenetic dynamic, which nobody controls and which is absolutely destructive of the natural environment.

Susen: There is another aspect which I find interesting about your book: your critical engagement with the nature of *power*. In this regard, you draw a *distinction between “organization” and “institutionalization”*. Are you suggesting that institutions and institutionalization processes are, by definition, *repressive* and *reactionary*, and hence something to be rejected?

Holloway: One of the criticisms made of *Change the World Without Taking Power* is that it is opposed to the idea of organization. That’s not true at all. I think that organization *is* very important, since we cannot achieve very much unless we organize, unless we do things collectively. Institutionalization, however, is the freezing of organization, the point at which it becomes rigid, that is, the point at which it degenerates into formal structures or inflexible habits. In such a scenario, you inevitably begin to *constrict* the force of social doing, and people begin to develop a distinction between “the leaders” and “the masses”. To my mind, institutionalization is always something that *curbs* the force of human creativity, of human doing.

Susen: Talking about “human creativity” and “human doing”, it seems to me that another issue worth discussing is the fact that one of the secrets underlying the relative success of the contemporary capitalist system is that, ironically, it appears to be capable of *re-appropriating the purposive, cooperative, and creative dimensions of “human doing”*⁷ in order to ensure its own existence. Would you concede that this is one of the key ingredients of its success? Once again, Boltanski’s work seems to be useful in this respect, notably his and Ève Chiapello’s influential study *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.⁸ As the two French scholars convincingly demonstrate, one constitutive element of this “new spirit” of capitalism is its capacity to keep going by *re-appropriating*—or, if you prefer, *exploiting*—the purposive, cooperative, and creative dimensions inherent in meaningful ways of “doing”. Are you suggesting that, even when an economic system succeeds in achieving this, there is still some sort of emancipatory potential inherent in this “doing capacity”, despite the fact that it is *colonized* by capitalism?

Holloway: Yes, I think so—absolutely. The contradiction is always there. The way in which I examine this issue in the book is by taking up the Marxist notion of the *dual nature of labour*: “*abstract labour*” and “*concrete labour*”. What happens under capitalism is that our activity is subordinated, channelled into a form which integrates everything into the totality of capital accumulation. Yet, even within this system, concrete labour is *never totally* subordinated to the logic of abstract labour. If it were, then there would be no point

in criticizing. In fact, if it were, then we would not be able to criticize. The fact that we *can* criticize indicates that there is something that does not fit in, that is, it implies that there is something that is *misfitting*. We may suggest that we are misfits because we are privileged intellectuals, in which case we effectively endorse an elitist position. On this account, since we work at universities, we have the privilege of not fitting in, a privilege which, supposedly, the masses do not have. I refuse to accept this view, because I think that we, as intellectuals, are *not* particularly special. If we are both conscious and critical of not fitting in, this is because we are part of the world's population, that is, of those who do not fit in. This experience of misfitting is a constitutive element of capitalist society. If we did fit in completely and were completely dominated by abstract labour and capitalist reproduction, then we would no longer be human.

Susen: What do you reply to those who challenge your explanation by asserting, for example, the following: "Well, actually, I *do* like my job. I *really* like what I'm doing. I don't feel alienated at all. I don't think I am being dominated by abstract labour."—What do you say to them?

Holloway: It's contradictory, isn't it? Actually, I like my job too! I enjoy teaching, I enjoy doing research, but it remains contradictory. There are aspects of my job which I detest. I think that, once you actually talk to people, you will find that this is probably true, to different degrees, of everybody. Yet, the view that we should all hate our jobs is complete nonsense, because part of what we perform as labour is *concrete* labour, as an experience which makes sense for us, as a *meaningful activity*. Not always, but in many cases it does...

Susen: When using words such as "*meaning*" and "*meaningful activity*", what do you have in mind? I have struggled with the concept of "meaning" for a long time. My students often ask me "What do you mean by 'meaning'?". And I respond "Well, to be honest, I find it very difficult to define!". Now, what do *you* mean by "meaning"? "Purpose"? Something we "project" upon the world? Something which is "inherent" in human life forms?

Holloway: Yes, some sort of purpose, but it's also something we need to think of *negatively*, in terms of *action against meaninglessness*. Most of us have experiences which strike us as being *meaningless*, especially those which are imposed upon us in some way. In this sense, it is a struggle against meaninglessness, that is, a *struggle and a search for meaning*.

Susen: Would you accept that, in your work, there is a danger of reducing the experience of meaninglessness to an *exogenously* triggered reality, that is, to an unsatisfactory and disempowering involvement in the world caused by the systemic forces of capitalist society? If so, should we not accept that, inevitably, in *any* kind of society—that is, even in emancipatory life forms—there will be situations in which we experience meaninglessness and in which we have the feeling that what we do does not make sense? I suppose the point I am making is that it would be erroneous to reduce the experience of meaninglessness to a subjective occurrence caused by external systemic forces. Would you accept this? I guess, in this case, I am asking you an existentialist question!

Holloway: Yes, I would accept this. The idea of complete meaningfulness is perhaps an illusion...I can't imagine the "perfect society"!

Susen: Anyway, you are not aiming for the construction of a "perfect society", are you?

Holloway: No. Emancipation is a social *process*. If, for instance, we think in terms of "communism", we cannot assume everything will be perfect. Rather, we need to understand that we are dealing with a constant process of "*communizing*". This communizing process, as I understand it, will always be, in some sense, a *struggle against meaninglessness*.

Susen: Talking about "communizing", your work is associated with labels such as "*open Marxism*" and "*autonomous Marxism*". Some people refer to it, somewhat pejoratively, as "subjectivist Marxism" or "warm Marxism". Let us, however, stick with "open Marxism" or "autonomous Marxism". I would like to ask you two questions in this regard. First, what are the key differences between "open Marxism" and "orthodox Marxism"? And, second, what are the main differences between your work and the writings of other contemporary Marxist scholars such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri?

Holloway: Well, the concept of "open Marxism" emerged way back when we were trying to develop something slightly different during my time at the University of Edinburgh...

Susen: ...with Werner Bonefeld and Richard Gunn?

Holloway: Yes, we began to think of this being an "*Edinburgh Marxism*". Then, Werner and Richard, together with Kosmas Psychopedis, co-edited the three-volume collection on "*open Marxism*".⁹ In fact, it was they who came up with the term "open Marxism". To my mind, the concept of "open Marxism" refers to the idea that *critique* is the *opening up of categories*, implying that they contain a *struggle* or that they conceal an *antagonism*. If you open up the category of "the state", for example, you see that the state is not just a means of domination but an active *process of "statification"*, an active process of channelling struggles into certain forms. You begin to understand that we are dealing with an *antagonistic movement*. It is an antagonistic movement which inevitably implies the existence of an *anti-state*, that is, the process of "anti-statification". We talk about "open Marxism" in order to emphasize the importance we attach to the "opening of categories" and to understanding them as being self-antagonistic. If we think of "labour", for instance, the crucial point is to conceive of it as a self-antagonistic category, rather than as a unitary concept. "Labour", as I see it, is a category which *obscures* the antagonism between "concrete labour" and "abstract labour". As such, it *conceals* the power of concrete labour and human creativity; it exists in the form of abstract labour, or—as Richard Gunn puts it—it exists "in the mode of being denied"¹⁰. On this account, "concrete labour" exists in the form of being denied. This means inevitably that it exists *in, against, and beyond* its own denial.

Over the last few years, there have been various discussions on the nature of abstract labour. Yet, on the whole, these discussions are too focused on abstract labour. As a consequence, they do not do justice to the importance of concrete labour. If, however, we

conceive of abstract labour as a category which obscures an underlying antagonism, then we begin to understand one of the key functions of abstract labour: namely, to conceal the constant struggle between the push of our own *creativity*, on the one hand, and the imposition of systemic integration into the *totality* of capitalist reproduction, on the other. You begin to comprehend, then, that all of social life under capitalism is composed of *antagonism*, an antagonism which is *concealed*, but which is *volcanic* in the sense that there is this kind of *eruptive force* there all the time, that is, a force which is pushing against its form and breaking through the form. This brings us back to the *cracks*. This is what the cracks are: eruptions that break through the logic of capitalist reproduction and spill over into the creation of *alternative forms of social activity*.

Susen: Let's consider the second part of my question. What are the main differences between your work and the writings of Hardt and Negri?

Holloway: What is very important for me is the idea of *turning Marxism upside down*. This endeavour is motivated by the conviction that we must *not* start from domination and that, therefore, we must *not* start from capital. Rather, we have to *think the world from struggle*. To my mind, this seems to be of fundamental importance: *we have to think from below*. My criticism of Hardt and Negri—that is, *our* criticism of them, because it has also been elaborated by Bonefeld and Gunn, as well as by other contemporary Marxist theorists—is that they fail to take this far enough. What I have been thinking recently is that this is not just a question of *turning the world upside down* but also a question of *turning it inside out*. In other words, we need to open up the categories and understand them as *self-antagonistic*, as I have mentioned before. It seems to me, however, that Hardt and Negri fail to do this. That's my main criticism regarding their approach.

Susen: Let us, in the remainder of the interview, have a closer look at the dimensions that I think are problematic about *Crack Capitalism*. Perhaps we can start by talking about the theme of “negativity”, or “negative dialectics”, in your book. Would you accept that some critics are suspicious of the fact that there appears to be a strong emphasis, possibly too strong an emphasis, on “negative dialectics” in your work? Obviously, you have good reason to be suspicious of ideological blueprints, positivist approaches, and “scientific Marxism”. Put differently, I think you are right to suggest that we should be critical of anyone affirming that they have found the solution to every problem. In connection with your emphasis on “negativity”, you use—or, possibly, overuse—terms such as “different”, “other”, and “alternative” in your book, but *without* specifying what this “difference”, “otherness”, or “alternativeness” actually stands for. Of course, you may reply that, if we seek to define the exact meaning of these “different”, “other”, and “alternative” forms of “doing”, then we fall into the trap of “positivist” or “scientific” Marxism. Would you nevertheless admit that, given the *terminological vagueness* of these concepts, your insistence upon the vital role of negativity is problematic?

Holloway: No, I wouldn't really. I think that *we do have to think negatively*. Even to pose the question of a different form of a social organization is to say “no” to existing forms of social

organization. It seems to me that this kind of “no” is the cutting edge that has to be there all the time. It shapes the grammar, or anti-grammar, of your thought. This, I believe, is much clearer in *Crack Capitalism* than in *Change the World Without Taking Power*. *Negativity*, as I see it, opens up a *space for alternative creation*. That’s the idea of the cracks, of the spaces of negation and creation. Negation gives rise to all sorts of experiments that explore the possibility of alternative social creations. People are trying to experiment in all sorts of ways, and it’s very difficult for us to judge the quality, let alone legitimacy, of these experiments. Certainly, we can have our own ideas, since we think and we criticize; but it doesn’t help to say, somewhat dogmatically, that any particular form of social experimentation is useless. We are dealing with *open* processes of experimentation.

Susen: I have noticed that some Marxist scholars, including some former colleagues of mine, who are less sympathetic to your work, occasionally characterize your approach as a kind of “left-wing romanticism”. And what they mean, I think, is that your texts are beautifully written, often read almost like poetry, and that you may aim to be taken seriously, first and foremost, by a different—perhaps non-academic—audience. Since you have spent a lot of time in Latin America, one may get the impression that the vocabularies—including academic vocabularies—which people use in “post-colonial” countries, such as Mexico, are very different from the vocabularies we use in Europe. Do you reckon this is the case or not? In particular, I am thinking of the influence the Zapatistas have had upon your work. Is there some truth to this?

Holloway: I’m not sure if that’s right. I don’t think it’s such a clear division. To my mind, it is a question of looking for *new vocabularies*, for trying to find different ways of expressing ourselves. It seems to me that this is very important indeed...

Susen: ...as illustrated in your conceptions of “grammar” and “anti-grammar”?¹¹

Holloway: Yes, exactly. Subcomandante Marcos is probably the most brilliant example that I can think of. In terms of people’s responses, however, I’m not sure. I wouldn’t say that the responses in Latin America are more favourable than the ones in Europe; I don’t actually feel that. With regard to the charge of “left-wing romanticism”, I don’t share this view. One of the lessons to be learned from twentieth-century revolutions is that revolution doesn’t work if you try to go half-way. It doesn’t work, for instance, if you say “we will abolish capital, but we will keep using money”. It doesn’t work if you say “we will get rid of capital, but we will keep the state, at least for the time being”. It doesn’t work if you say “we will do away with capital, but we will preserve hierarchical institutions”. From my perspective, the only realistic way of thinking about social transformation is to put it in much more *radical* terms. Admittedly, this may *sound* “romantic”, but it seems to me that this *is* actually much more realistic, much more realistic in the sense of taking note of what people think and feel, of people’s reactions against capitalism. I am referring to a kind of drive against capitalism which goes very deep, which touches people’s dreams, which touches ideas about how we relate to other people and about our sexuality, about all sorts of things. In this sense, contrary to your charge, this so-called “romanticism” is utterly realistic.

Susen: Another aspect which interests me is the role of *normativity* in your writings. You mentioned earlier that you don't think much of the theoretical contributions made by contemporary critical theorists such as Habermas and Honneth. As you probably know, however, there is a sustained concern with the concept of normativity in their works. Reflecting upon the concept of normativity, I guess the question that arises in relation to *your* work can be put as follows: how can you possibly defend the importance of key *normative* concepts—notably “dignity”, “responsibility”, “autonomy”, and “humanity”—for the possibility of social struggle *without* providing *normative foundations* on which to justify the significance of these reference points for such a struggle? Are you of the view that the search for normative grounds, inevitably, leads to some sort of sterile and ahistorical “foundationalism” or late modern “positivism”?

Holloway: I don't know, possibly!

Susen: Can you elaborate on this? I suppose you disagree with me on this aspect. It seems to me that one of the key strengths of Habermas's work is that, in his engagement with the theoretical frameworks provided by early critical theorists, he points out that, for example, one of the main problems with Adorno's writings is the *lack of concern with the normative foundations of critical thought*. Thus, Adorno may help us to think of the possibilities of an emancipatory society, based on empowering forms of “doing”, but, as Habermas contends, he fails to provide any kind of normative grounds on which to justify such a project. As I am sure you know, Habermas seeks to locate the emancipatory potential of society in language, that is, in our ability to reach mutual understanding by engaging in communicative action. I know that this is obviously not what you are trying to do. Do you think, however, that it is possible to defend *normative concepts*—such as “dignity”, “responsibility”, “autonomy”, or “humanity”—*without* providing *normative foundations*?

Holloway: I think any foundations have to be *negative*. A critical conception of dignity has to understand dignity as the *struggle against the negation of dignity*. The only concept of truth we can have is truth in terms of the *struggle against the negation of truth*. The other thing, I suppose, is that, at some level, you have to recognize that at the basis of all doing is some sort of *experiential judgement*. We *are*, we *do*, and we *understand* on the basis of our *experience* of the world. Yet, we have to conceive of this experience of the world not simply in terms of individual experiences, but also in terms of collective experiences.

Susen: Do you mean in terms of *shared* experiences?

Holloway: Yes, in terms of shared experiences. Shared experiences, however, are not necessarily universally shared. That's something on which, in a sense, we decide individually. I would say, for instance, that my experiential judgement of the world is that capitalism stinks, that it constitutes a horrific form of social organization, which is rushing us towards the self-destruction of humanity and, in fact, the destruction of much more than just humanity. For me, then, “scientific” reflection must be guided by the question of how we can get out of this terrible situation. How do we *break* that dynamic? How can we create a different social

dynamic? How do we create a revolution (whatever this word may mean)? Hence, in some sense, I would say that this is the way in which I experience the world. To be sure, this understanding of the world is constantly being questioned, but it is also constantly being reinforced by what I see around me. The world in which we live is a negation of dignity and a negation of humanity. This means that my concept of science is necessarily *negative*, in the sense that I maintain that all scientific reflection should be oriented towards the question of how on earth we can get out of here, how on earth we can stop all this mad rush towards the self-destruction of humanity.

Susen: One of the things I noticed when reading *Crack Capitalism* is that, at least to my mind, you have a tendency to treat capitalism not only as a *homogenizing* system but also as a relatively *homogeneous* system, based on some sort of surreptitiously orchestrated *Gleichschaltung*¹². It seems to me that this tendency is deeply problematic in the sense that it does not account for the fact that there are *varieties of capitalism* out there. In fact, not only do we need to acknowledge that the history of modernity is characterized by the emergence of varieties of capitalism, but, in addition, we need to recognize that capitalist societies are *internally differentiated* in terms of sociological variables such as class, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, and “ability”—to mention only a few of them. You appear to ignore, or at least underestimate, the sociological significance of these internal patterns of social differentiation. Scholars who specialize in the sociological study of one or more of these variables tend to agree that there does not seem to be one “foundational” factor in the construction of social life. For the right or the wrong reasons, this insight is often discussed in terms of “*intersectionality*”. By contrast, your writings—including your most recent ones—are marked by a tendency to reduce all social phenomena to “class”, or at least to “class struggle”. Are you not willing to concede that capitalist domination is only *one* amongst many other forms of domination and that, more importantly, some forms of domination do not have anything to do with capitalism? Furthermore, what is crucial from a sociological point of view is that, in specific historical situations or interactional settings, other forms of domination can have more of an impact upon social practices than capitalist modes of domination. What do you respond to critics who raise these concerns?

Holloway: I don’t conceive of capitalist society as a homogeneous system, but I do regard it as being *homogenizing*. I interpret social development as being driven by a dynamic, by a dynamic which is rooted in the way human activity is organized. *Under capitalism, human activity is permeated by the subordination of concrete labour to abstract labour*. I would find it difficult to make sense of the capitalist dynamic of destruction, for instance, in terms of *gender*...

Susen: ...or in terms of *ethnicity* or in terms of any other sociological variable on my list.

Holloway: Yes, because this is not what I am trying to understand. What I want to stop is this dynamic of destruction, and this means focusing on the way *human activity* is organized. The way I understand the organization of human activity is in terms of *capital*, in terms of the way in which our individual activities are bound together through abstract labour.

Susen: Am I right to suggest that a central presupposition you share with “orthodox Marxists” is the assumption that, if we want to uncover the logic underlying the large-scale *destruction of the planet*, we need to give priority to the analysis of *capitalism*? If I understand you correctly, however, your conception of “open Marxism” differs from “orthodox Marxism” in that you regard key sociological variables—such as class, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, and “ability”—as *irreducible* and relatively *autonomous*, thereby recognizing that their existence manifests itself in interrelated, yet relatively independent, mechanisms of repression and discrimination?

Holloway: No, I would say that they are *not* separate. For example, where does the idea that there are two genders come from? Why do we divide up society between “men” and “women”? Why on earth? Why not divide it up according to the colour of hair, the colour of eyes, or whatever? Why in this gender-specific way? What I try to argue in *Crack Capitalism* is that this way of structuring society arises from the way in which our activities are organized. To my mind, there is no “hierarchy of contradictions”. If, however, we are going to talk about the possibility of changing society, then we have to look at the ways in which human activity is organized. This, I believe, is the central issue: the *self-antagonistic organization of human activity*. Yet, the self-antagonistic organization of human activity is not just an issue of economics; rather, it is a matter of what generates the dominance of nouns over verbs, what converts time into the dictatorship of clock time, and what leads to the idea of two sexes.

Susen: Talking about “the sexes”, why do you, in *Crack Capitalism*, identify the “labourer” with the “he” and with the “masculine”, whilst associating the “doer” with the “she” and with the “feminine”?¹³

Holloway: I think that...

Susen: ...it is more of a metaphor?

Holloway: Yes, it is a metaphor, but at the same time it is not, because, on the whole, it is true that *abstract labour* is very much tied up with *male domination*. The organization of labour, including our understanding of the organization of wage labour or of abstract labour, has always been completely dominated by men. I believe that, at the moment, the revolt against labour is a revolt in which, empirically, women play a much more important role.

Susen: On a different note, do you agree with the contention that there is a strong *functionalist* element in your work? In this respect, I think in particular of your conception of *capital*. As far as I can see, one of the main contradictions in your book is that you seem to be implying that capital is a sort of anonymous and uncontrollable *systemic force* and, at the same time, you portray capital as if it were a *will-equipped subject* capable of exercising power over us and “doing” things.

Holloway: I am not sure about this. There is certainly a danger with this kind of conceptual shorthand, which may be unhelpful. Whether this means “functionalist”...I wouldn’t have thought so.

Susen: Well, I guess one of the main objectives of your writings is to make sense of the key *functions* of particular social mechanisms, structures, and institutions. Be it as it may, let us talk about your conceptual *distinction between “labour” and “doing”*. As far as I remember, this is a distinction that you did not draw in your previous book, *Change the World Without Taking Power*, did you?

Holloway: Not very much.

Susen: Would it be right to suggest that the conceptual differentiation between “labour” and “doing” is the most fundamental distinction you draw in *Crack Capitalism*? If so, why?

Holloway: Yes, I think so. One of the interesting things about the discussions arising from *Change the World Without Taking Power* was that I was invited to give various talks and join numerous meetings with different groups, who were trying to develop *alternative conceptions of social activity*. For me, one of the most striking things in this regard is the importance people attribute to thinking *creatively* about alternatives. They are dedicating themselves to alternative forms of activity; some of them are extremely active in a way which—for them at least—*breaks*, or seeks to break, with the logic of capitalism. They are doing this not because they are going to get a lot of money for it, or because they are generating an economic profit, but because this is something they really consider to be important. This, I believe, illustrates that we need to draw a distinction between *two forms of activity*: on the one hand, a form of activity which is, if you like, *integrated* into the system and generally *remunerated by money*; and, on the other hand, a form of activity which people are *choosing* and which, in some way, is being directed against the logic of the system and *pushing beyond* its dominance. This takes us to the Marxist distinction between “*abstract labour*” and “*concrete labour*”. I conceive of the latter as being *our* activity, which is generally subordinated by and integrated into the system through the former, that is, through abstraction.

There is, however, an underlying antagonism, which potentially goes beyond capitalism. So that’s what I’m trying to do in theoretical terms. For me, that’s really the most important advance in the book: if we are opening up other categories (such as the state, money, or whatever), we have to reflect upon the central category of labour, and we have to *open it up*, as indeed Marx also does. We need to understand this opening up as an *internal contradiction*, as being an *antagonism*. In fact, we live *within* an antagonism, which is at the centre of today’s struggles; it is, if you like, at the centre of class conflict.

Susen: What do you say to those who criticize you for using the concept of “doing” not only as a *foundational* category but also as a pivotal category which, paradoxically, is remarkably *vague*?

Holloway: I think that this is precisely the problem. If we are talking of our drive towards a different sort of society that already exists, but exists in the form of being negated, then it follows that we don’t have the vocabulary to express adequately that which is suppressed, simply because the vocabulary is part of that which exists in the form of its negation. So it is true that “doing” is not a terribly satisfactory word, but it is the best I can think of.

Susen: Yet, it can be used to describe *any* performative act, don't you think?

Holloway: Yes, it can. Marx, as I explained before, chooses to use the concept of "concrete labour", which is not particularly satisfactory either. I suppose we just have to live with the fact that we don't always have adequate conceptual tools to capture the nature of all the things we want to describe. Sometimes we have to try and find, or create, those concepts.

Susen: Let's address another problematic point. From my perspective, one of the weaknesses of *Crack Capitalism* is the *socio-ontological idealism* upon which its main argument is based. In other words, you appear to assume that the "bright" aspects of social life (such as cooperation, communication, mutual understanding, democracy, and autonomy) are preponderant over the "dark" aspects of our existence (such as competition, rivalry, social ranking, envy, and heteronomy). Do you accept that both various "bright" *and* several "dark" dimensions are *present*, or perhaps even *inherent*, in human life? If so, do you acknowledge that it is somewhat simplistic to reduce the "dark" sides of social existence to the instrumental nature of systemic structures, institutions, and capitalism?

Holloway: You may well be right, but, in a sense, we're taking sides, aren't we? I'm not particularly interested in writing a book which suggests that there is no way out, that there is no future, and that evil will dominate—that's not my thing. What you say, however, may be true; it may well be true. Yet, the whole effort of writing the book is to try and demonstrate that, in spite of its apparent impossibility, there is still some way out. It's a question of hope against hope. It's a question of how we find hope in a dark night.

Susen: Reflecting upon the Special Issue on *Crack Capitalism*, when you look at the articles of this collection, would you say that there were perhaps two or three key issues raised in the commentaries that made you think "They got it completely wrong!"? Moreover, would you concede that there were possibly two or three key aspects that made you think "Wow, they have a point, and this is something on which I really need to reflect very carefully in the future!"?

Holloway: Certainly. Yes, there are points which, from my perspective, people got completely wrong and, surely, others which make me think they got it absolutely right. Yet, it's difficult to say exactly what, because it requires a long digestion process, doesn't it?

Susen: Fair enough. The Special Issue on *Crack Capitalism* was meant to be a constructive dialogue between you and your critics, wasn't it? As you mention in "Variations on Different Themes: A Response"¹⁴, the concluding piece of this collection of articles, "[o]verwhelmingly, the contributions are written with the intention of *carrying the debate forward, not for the purpose of scoring points*"¹⁵.

Holloway: Yes, absolutely. That's what I thought.

Susen: Finally, how about your future? What's your next major project on the horizon?

Holloway: Nothing terribly clear for the moment, but I am reflecting upon the meaning of crisis. In particular, I am grappling with the question of how we can understand *the unity of crisis theory and revolutionary theory*. So, I guess, the next book will be about how to understand *the relationship between crisis and revolution*.

Susen: Thank you very much for your time, John.

Holloway: Thank you.

Notes

This interview took place on 19th September 2012 at City University London.

¹ Holloway (2010).

² Holloway (2002) and Holloway ([2002] 2005).

³ On this point, see, for example: Holloway (1998); Holloway and Peláez (1998a); Holloway and Peláez (1998b).

⁴ Holloway (2012a). This Special Issue contains the following contributions: Cockburn (2012); Foran (2012); Garland (2012); Gunn and Wilding (2012); Holloway (2012b); Holloway (2012c); Reitter (2012); Stoetzler (2012); Susen (2012a); Tischler (2012); Young and Schwartz (2012).

⁵ See, for instance, the Special Issue on Holloway's previous book, *Change the World Without Taking Power*, published in *Historical Materialism*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2005: Bensaïd (2005); Binford (2005); De Angelis (2005); Holloway (2005); Lebowitz (2005); Starosta (2005); Stoetzler (2005).

⁶ On this point, see, for example: Boltanski (1990); Boltanski (1998); Boltanski (2009); Boltanski and Honneth (2009); Boltanski, Rennes, and Susen (2010). See also, for instance: Susen (2011); Susen (2012a); Susen (2012b).

⁷ For a critical discussion of these dimensions, see, for example, Susen (2007: 104-107, 280-283).

⁸ Boltanski and Chiapello ([1999] 2005). See also, for instance: Bidet (2002); Gadrey, Hatchuel, Boltanski, and Chiapello (2001); Turner (2007).

⁹ Bonefeld, Gunn, and Psychopedis (1991); Bonefeld, Gunn, and Psychopedis (1992); Bonefeld, Gunn, Holloway, and Psychopedis (1995).

¹⁰ Gunn (1992: 14). On this point, see also Gunn (1987, 1991). In addition, see Holloway (2010: 169) and Susen (2012a: 294, 319 n. 77).

¹¹ See especially Holloway (2010: 199). See also Susen (2012a: 292, 301-302).

¹² Translation from German into English: "synchronization", "making the same", or "bringing into line".

¹³ On this point, see Holloway (2010: 218-220).

¹⁴ Holloway (2012c).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 332 (*italics added*).

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