

Against and Beyond the State: An Interview with John Holloway

October 8, 2007

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In February of 2007, John Holloway and Marina Sitrin discussed the new social movements in Latin America, power, the state, and prefigurative politics. This is a continuation of a discussion that began in 2004, also on the topics of power, prefigurative politics and Latin America (<http://auto.sol.ao.ca/node/view/1052>).

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MS: Our last interview/conversation was in 2004. In that we focused a great deal on the question of state power, and on not taking it in particular. We grounded most of the conversation in the autonomous social creations that have been and are taking place in Latin America. Today, in February of 2007, many people argue that much has since changed in Latin America. I am thinking in particular about the 7 "left" governments now in formal positions of power, from Bolivia and Venezuela to Ecuador and Nicaragua, and the people who say that "now" the left has arrived. Has there really been the shift that people are talking about? Is the important shift in formal power, as most commentators address? Should this even be the starting point of our conversation?

JH: Yes, I think it is a good place to start. These are not miserable times. Perhaps that is the most important point. Friends write to me from Europe sometimes and it is clear that they are thinking in terms of Johannes Agnoli's argument, that it is important to keep subversive thought alive especially in miserable times such as the present. But, living in Latin America, it is very clear that these are not miserable times. They may be awful times, frightening times (especially in Mexico at the moment), but they are not miserable: they are exciting times, full of struggle and full of hope. The importance of the rise of the "left" governments is that they are a reflection of the strength of struggle in the continent as a whole, and that is very important.

I say "reflection," but they are also a response to the rise of social struggles, a very complex and contradictory response. In all cases, they represent the attempt to statify the struggle, to give it a state form, which means of course to de-fuse the struggle and channel it into forms of organisation compatible with the reproduction of capital. In some cases the "left" governments are openly reformist and repressive (Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay), in other cases (Venezuela, in particular), there seems to be a genuine attempt to push the state form to the limit, to open it out into real forms of popular control.

How far that can be done from within state structures and from within a leader dominated organisation I doubt very much, but certainly the trajectory of the Venezuelan government has been much more interesting than what one would have expected.

MS: So the real importance of the "left" governments is not the façade but the fact that behind the façade the continent is fizzing.

JH: It's the fizzing of the continent, and where the fizzing is located, that I want to talk more about. I agree that the real inspiration in Latin America today is behind the façade of the "left" governments, with the social movements. In particular I am thinking about the more autonomous movements, from the Zapatistas and APPO in Mexico, to the Coordinadora del Agua y por la Vida in Bolivia, to the autonomous unemployed workers movements in Argentina, and the hundreds of now recuperated and occupied workplaces, not only in Argentina, but also Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, Chile etc.

MS: What effect do you think the new "left" governments have on these more autonomous movements? Do they open up more space for the movements?

JH: No, I don't think they open up spaces for the movements. Or possibly they open up spaces for what the movements want to do, but push them into a different way of doing it, into a way of doing things that blends into the system. In the best of cases, there is an expropriation of a revolution: the government carries out many of the aims of the movement, but it does it on behalf of the movement, telling the movement in effect to stay at home or convert itself into the loyal supporter of the government. This is very much the feeling I got in Bolivia, for example.

Certainly the Evo Morales government means a significant break with previous governments, and it is implementing the demands of the movement that brought down the previous presidents, but it is doing so in a diluted form. And the social movements are given the option of either declaring unconditional loyalty or being marginalised by the government. So there is a real expropriation and dilution of the revolutionary movement. I think this is probably true of any really left government, understanding by "really left" a government that actually grows out of the movement itself. In other cases, of course, like Argentina, the government does not grow out of the movement, but simply offers a more liberal response to the movement than previous governments.

MS: Is it better, then, to have a left or a right-wing government, or does it not make any difference?

JH: I think that, on the whole, it is probably better to have a left government, though not always. In the case of Mexico, I think that López Obrador would probably have been less repressive and destructive than the Calderón government is proving to be. But there would certainly have been a process of expropriation of the movement, of converting a movement pushing towards autonomy into support for a government claiming to act on behalf of the movement. The important thing is to maintain our own logic and forms of organisation, whatever the colour of the government.

MS: So, how do we do this? What does that look like?

JH: I know it is a question that people in the various movements are asking themselves and one another. Even before the elections of "left" governments, many people were questioning how to continue organizing based on their own space and time. Now the questions appear even sharper.

MS: What do you see as some possible paths?

JH: For example, in the 1990s the group HIJOS in Argentina, children of the disappeared, began to shift the discussion about the dictatorship to one of community, breaking with the idea of non-involvement (no te metas). HIJOS is a horizontal network that uses direct action and self-organization. Over the past year the Kirshner government has invited members of HIJOS to participate in legal processes that will potentially hold many responsible for the murders during the dictatorship. One of the catches is that they have to do it using representatives, and decisions are made without having the time to consult the group. The result is a challenge to the horizontal relationships and self-organization they have created. Another example of these challenges is in Bolivia, where the same autonomous movements who fought for a constituent assembly now find themselves excluded for not meeting the qualifications the State requires for participation. They cannot participate in something that came from them.

MS: What to do? How do we continue to create our own space and time?

JH: I think that's always a difficult question. It's one thing to say that we can't change the world through the state – that seems to me fairly clear. But it's very difficult to say that we will have no relation at all with the state. I am a professor in a state university and probably many of the people reading this receive some sort of income from the state. So it is not a question of purity – there is no purity in a capitalist society. It is a question of how we deal with the implications of our contact with the state, how we avoid falling into the state as a form of organisation. One important issue is whether movements should accept any form of state funding or subsidy. The Zapatistas (for whom I obviously have an enormous admiration) take the line that they will accept absolutely no subsidy. Given the situation in Chiapas I think they are probably right, but it does put some of their supporters in situations of deprivation that are extremely difficult to maintain. The piqueteros of Solano (for whom I also have enormous admiration) take the position that they will accept the subsidies for the unemployed – since it is simply taking back a small part of what they themselves, as workers, have created – but that they must retain collective control over the money themselves. Perhaps the important thing is not the content of the decision (whether to accept money or not) but how the decision is taken – as a genuinely horizontal decision constantly re-questioned – and therefore also the struggle to retain genuinely horizontal-democratic control over the whole process, a real mandar obedeciendo. That is how I would see the HIJOS example that you mention. The Bolivian example is slightly different, I see it more as part of the expropriation of the revolution that I mentioned in the last answer. But then, of course, the question is how to fight against that expropriation.

MS: How does one fight against this intervention and expropriation?

JH: One of the challenges that I see is that the state is determining the framework of the conversation. In Bolivia the state is proposing certain things that would potentially be good for the population and the population is invited to participate in this. Do you participate? And even if you participate in the most horizontal way, as a community or collective, the discussion is one framed by the state. The state is now the beginning point of the conversation. How can this really be horizontal if the agenda is predetermined? So, for example, you are part of an autonomous community outside Cochabamba in Bolivia, of which there are now many. These communities may be discussing network-like relations to one another and alternative forms of exchange. Now the government of Evo proposes nationalization of resources in that community. How to continue to both organize autonomously and respond to the state. Can both be done? How does an autonomous community not have their path subsumed by what seems like the good intentions of the state? Can there be a relationship to the state that still allows autonomy? And, last, if the decision is to continue to organize autonomously, and not allow the state's agenda to become that of the movement or community, how does a community explain to other parts of society, who see the intentions of the state as good, why they are ignoring the state's agenda?

In this interview you are setting the agenda with your questions. If I didn't like the questions (but I do, I do – I like them very much), I wouldn't just ignore the question, I would reply in a way that sought to re-impose my agenda. A conversation is always two-sided. If you tell me that you're going to nationalise gas on our behalf, then I say "Excellent, but if it's on our behalf, then let us administer it." The issue is one of form, isn't it, rather than content, the how rather than the what of politics. That is surely what we have to push all the time. The central problem with Evo and with Chávez is not so much what they're doing as the way that they are doing it, the organisational forms involved.

In other words, our relation with the state is not just against, and not just beyond, but against-and-beyond. The only autonomy we can have is an autonomy that moves against-and-beyond, with as much emphasis on the beyond as possible – getting on with our own project, but understanding that project as a movement against-and-beyond. There is no pure exodus, only contradictory movements of rupture.

MS: Where do you see these ruptures that are also creations? The against and beyond?

JH: All over the place. I think it is a question of opening our eyes and seeing the World not in terms of domination but in terms of insubordination. The against-and-beyond I see as refusal-and-creation: "No, we are not going to do what capital requires of us; we are going to do what we consider necessary or desirable." This is what the Zapatistas are saying: "¡Ya basta! Enough of being oppressed, we are going to get on with our own project, create our own Juntas de Buen Gobierno, our own system of health and education. And we are going to radiate and resonate outwards, we are not just going to be a closed autonomy, but a crack in the system of domination, a crack that spreads." But of course there are loads and loads of other examples.

Sometimes it is because the state just isn't there that people have no alternative but to take matters into their own hands. That has been the case in El Alto in Bolivia, where the profound tradition of self-government was a major source of the strength of the movement of rebellion in recent years – again not just an autonomy but a crack in domination. Sometimes

it is on a much smaller scale, a group of people getting together and deciding that they are going to dedicate their lives to what they consider important, whether it be cultivating the land or creating an alternative café. Here in Puebla, we have a wonderful Zapatista café, Espiral 7, which has become a focal point of the whole movement against-and-beyond. But often it is on a much more silent level, individuals or groups of friends deciding that they are not going to shape their lives according to the demands of money, but that they are going to set their own agenda.

Perhaps it is all about setting our own agenda. The core of capitalism is that it is a system of command over what we do. To rebel is to say "no, we shall determine what we shall do, we shall set our own agenda." In other words, within the against-and-beyond, we want the beyond to set as much as possible the direction and pace for the against. Obviously this can be very difficult in practice, but the great problem of the left is that we let capital determine the agenda most of the time, and then we follow behind, protesting. In the Otra Campaña, for example, the repression in Atenco meant that the government effectively regained control of the agenda when Marcos decided to interrupt his tour of the country. Certainly the struggle against the repression was and is crucial, but it is very important for us not to lose control of our own rhythms of struggle. This is something the Zapatistas have been very good at, on the whole, and it is a point emphasised for example by the MTD Solano, one of the most impressive piquetero groups in Argentina.

Once one begins to focus on these against-and-beyonds, these cracks in domination, then one's image of the world begins to change. We begin to see it not (or not just) as a world of domination but as a world full of refusal-and-creations, full of dignities of all kinds.

Many academics, especially those writing in the English language, have been writing critically about the horizontal movements in Latin America. They claim that the movements have failed due to not understanding class and power (That they did/do not want to take it). Now these same people, James Petras or Tariq Ali for example, are writing of the victory of the left, ignoring in most cases what many people in the movements actually desire or are creating. I see this as one-sided, narrow, and historically inaccurate, taking us back to the timeframe of the 1960-90s. However, these are the writings that most people trying to find out about what is going on in Latin America read.

MS: Do you think this does damage to the movements?

Yes, generally I'm in favour of a broad concept of comradeship, that we should regard all those who say no to capitalism as comrades (at least as comrades of the No, even if not as comrades of the Yes), but sometimes it's hard to maintain. I agree that there's an extraordinary blindness to what's happening, a sort of desperation to squeeze the struggles of today into frameworks of thought constructed in the youth of the commentators. It's as if they are wearing blinkers that simply will not allow them to see. For them the victory of the left is Chávez and Evo and sometimes even Kirchner and Lula and they don't see that these electoral successes are, at best, extremely contradictory elements in a very real surge of struggle in Latin America. I'm not sure that these writings have much effect on the movements themselves, but they do spread their blindness especially to readers outside Latin America. What we need of course is more books like your own Horizontalism to let people hear what is actually happening and what people are doing and saying.

MS: Many reading this conversation are already inspired by the movements growing across the globe, especially in Latin America, and will likely, or have already, begun to think, ok, so how do I move against and beyond the state? What does that mean and what could it look like? Should I go and spend time with autonomous movements? What do you say to people who ask these sorts of questions?

JH: There's no recipe, is there? Certainly I meet lots of people who have spent time in Zapatista communities and I'm always very impressed by them and what they've learnt. But I think the central point is probably the Zapatista principle of starting from where we are, to fight to transform where we are: not only to build the Movement (though that may be important), but to try to set our own agenda in whatever we are doing. In Marxist terms, to struggle for use value against value, creative or useful doing against abstract labour. And very important, to look around and recognise, to learn to see all the ways in which people are already struggling against and beyond capital, struggling for dignity in their everyday lives. The most terribly destructive idea on the left is the idea that we're special, that we're different. We're not – everybody rebels in some way: our problem is to recognise rebellion and find a way of touching it. The most profound challenge of the Zapatistas is when they say "we are perfectly ordinary people, therefore rebels": that is perhaps the most important thing – to understand the everyday nature of revolution.

Perhaps a more practical answer: there's a wonderful new book coming out by the Trapeze Collective called *Do it Yourself* (Pluto Press) with a very practical guide to what we can do, setting up community gardens, organising social centres, organising without leaders, taking charge of our own health and education, and so on.

MS: What is one of the most inspiring moments that you have seen/felt in the last year? What made it so inspiring?

JH: Two answers. The first is not a moment but a whole lot of moments, when I've been invited to all sorts of meetings of autonomous groups in Venezuela, Argentina, Bolivia, Guatemala, or here in Mexico and the experience is often just overwhelming, meeting the people involved in the struggles and seeing their commitment and enthusiasm and the way in which different social relations are really already a reality for so many people, and seeing especially the young people and the depth of their understanding and their capacities – in Guatemala, for example, I met a fourteen-year-old from the countryside who was doing regular radio broadcasts on topics such as the proposed Free Trade Agreement. The reality is running so far ahead of any theoretical reflections we make.

The second occurred is just a few days ago, at a short concert of music from Veracruz that I happened to find myself attending. The musicians were amazing. It suddenly made me feel that this is what communism is about, not because it was free (it was), not because of the political content of the music (there wasn't any), but just because it was a moment in which time was suspended, in which creative or useful doing took absolute priority over abstract labour, use value over value, enjoyment over obligation. Perhaps we have to think of communism (or whatever we call it) not so much (or not just) in terms of space as in terms of time, as the breaking of time and the creation, expansion and multiplication of liberated moments.