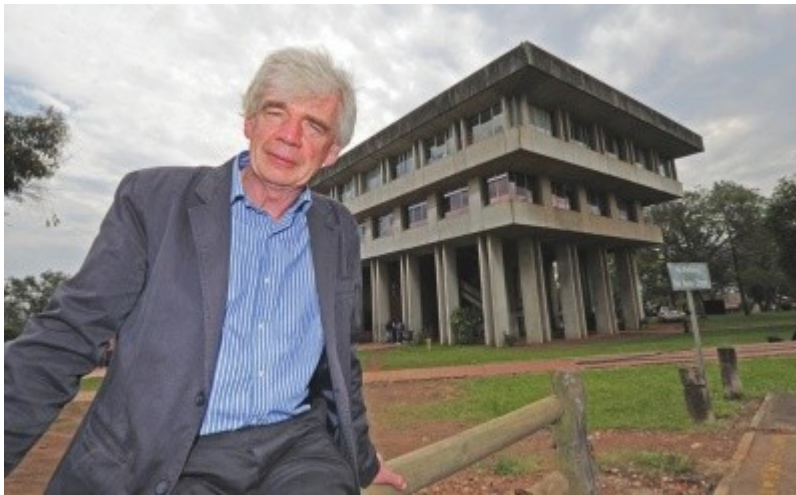


## Tsunami of small rebellions

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*John Holloway interviewed by Yves Vanderhaeghen for The Witness.*



*Photo: Ian Carbutt*

DESCRIBED as a “gentle revolutionary”, John Holloway is a communist philosopher, lawyer and academic who champions the cause of the Zapatista peasants’ movement in Mexico, and whose current visit to South Africa was inspired by the urban social movement Abahlali baseMjondolo. Its values of community-based organisation, grassroots action, individual responsibility and a spirit of rebellion represent what he sees as essential elements in the struggle against oppression. He is, not unexpectedly, resolutely opposed to capitalism, which he describes as a “monstrous act of aggression”, and against which he proposes a kinder, gentler communism. However, his people-first philosophy argues strongly against a politics based on the impulse to power. The struggle is lost “once the logic of power becomes the logic of the revolutionary process”. Revolutionary movements fail because they assume the shape of the oppressive regimes they topple, a criticism increasingly directed against the South African government, especially after the Marikana mine massacre. To escape from this graveyard of dreams, Holloway proposes direct, daily action by ordinary people, whether shack-dwellers, miners or peasants.

Holloway has published extensively. His writings include ***Crack Capitalism, The Concept of Power & the Zapatistas, Dignity’s Revolt,*** and ***Change The World Without Taking Power.*** He has recently been a visiting lecturer at Rhodes University. While in KwaZulu-Natal, he has met members of Abahlali baseMjondolo in Durban and has given a series of talks in Pietermaritzburg as a guest of the Church Land Programme.

**You argue for an “autonomist” struggle against oppression. What does this mean?**

I think that the forms of struggling for a better society beyond capitalism have been gradually shifting. Instead of the struggles being focused on the conquest of state power, people are trying, in very, very many different ways to break from the logic of capitalism, creating spaces or moments in which they try to create in a way that is not dominated by the pursuit of profit. These spaces or moments can be seen as cracks in the texture of domination, cracks in which we are perhaps laying the basis for a different organisation of society. This sort of struggle aims not at conquering power in the future but at uncoupling social activity from the capitalist dynamic in the present.

**You consider the ultimate objective of the oppressed as being to struggle against capitalism. Many thinkers suggest that capitalism has won, that it is all-encompassing, and that any politics can only take place within it. Is this defeatist? Is there any room left for a Left politics?**

We are born into struggle. Most of us would probably prefer to live quite peacefully, but we are attacked: we are told we must work harder, faster; we are told that our children cannot expect secure employment; we are told that our life as peasants is no longer viable, that we must move into cities and make way for highways or mines. We also know that if the present social dynamic continues, it is very possible that humans will destroy the conditions of their own existence within a relatively short time. In these circumstances, I do not see that acceptance of defeat is an option.

**Following on from this, do you consider the Occupy Movement, and the mass public protests in Madrid and Athens, as challenges to capitalism ... or a desperate appeal to be let into the system?**

Overwhelmingly, it seems to be a challenge to the system, not just a plea to be let in. Look at some of the slogans from Madrid: “We are not against the system, the system is against us”; “Our dreams do not fit in your urns”; “If you do not let us dream, we will not let you sleep”.

**Your thinking is premised on an “emancipatory politics”. What shape do you see emancipation as having?**

By “emancipatory politics”, I understand a politics that aims to liberate human creativity and stop the headlong rush towards human self-annihilation that capitalism means. I think it starts with refusal, rejection of the horrors of the existing system. In the best of cases, this refusal opens a process of creating alternative ways of doing things, other ways of relating to people. Emancipation does not have just one shape, but many shapes which emerge in the process of creating them.

**Does some notion of real democracy inform your idea of social activism? How would a Westminster-style parliamentary process fit into a truly democratic project, if at all?**

It would not fit at all. But it is not just my idea of social activism. That is what activists all over the world are saying: representative democracy does not work, or rather it works to exclude us from collective control over our own lives. The movements of recent years have been overwhelmingly assembly-based movements, rejecting representative democracy explicitly in favour of some form of direct democracy, some form of involving all in collective decisions.

**You argue for individual action as the cornerstone of the fight against oppression. What sort of individual actions would you envisage as doable during the course of one's working, or non-working, day?**

They would include land invasions, rates boycotts, factory occupations, the creation of community gardens, alternative radio stations, anti-capitalist interviews in newspapers. Individually and collectively, people rebel in all sorts of ways during their working or non-working days. Sometimes these rebellions are very small and seem quite ineffective, but there always exist lines of continuity or potential that connect them with the great uprisings.

**How would such individual actions total up to a social movement?**

In ways that are hard to predict, and that may or may not happen. I think of them as cracks that spread, join up, get plastered over, reappear, come together again, or not. There is a huge element of uncertainty and unpredictability, but I think that is the way radical changes come about: they are nearly always a surprise, they emerge out of the invisible.

**You emphasise the need for dignity ... In the trenches of class warfare, is dignity not just a whimsical fantasy?**

It would be if it were simply I who emphasise the importance of dignity, but it is the movements themselves that have brought the term to the fore. It is actually a highly practical principle of organisation: it is on the basis of the mutual recognition of people's dignity that you are likely to get a profoundly united movement.

**Is there room for violence in a dignified struggle?**

To organise around violence would make it difficult to maintain the mutual recognition of people's dignity in the centre, especially since that presupposes direct democracy: but I can see circumstances in which it is very difficult to avoid violence.

**You have been very involved in the Zapatista movement in Mexico. What parallels do you see between that struggle and South Africa?**

I have only been in South Africa for two weeks, and it is my first visit, so I am not well-qualified to answer. But from what I have seen, the concept of dignity has a lot of resonance here and, as in Mexico, there is a searching for a new way of thinking about radical politics. The attempt to change things through the state has failed — the people say over and over again that nothing has changed for them since 1994. There is a "Ya Basta!" in the air, an "Enough!". A feeling that the system has reached breaking point, that it can no longer be accepted.

**You talk of changing the world without taking power? Is this not a hippie hangover?**

It is above all a reflection of the failure of the attempts to change the world by taking state power. They have failed and we urgently need to create another way of changing things, and of thinking about it.

**You consider rebelling to be an obligation in capitalist society. Is there a point where you would consider rebelling to be redundant?**

I think of rebelling as being inevitable rather than an obligation. Nearly all of us rebel in some way, consciously or unconsciously. In one way or another, nearly all of us have some sense of walking in the wrong direction, going against the dictates of a society dominated by profit and by money. Rebellion is deeply ingrained in our lives and must be as long as the social dynamic constitutes an assault on our dignity.