

We Are the Crisis of Capital

A John Holloway Reader

John Holloway





In ancient Greek philosophy, *kairos* signifies the right time or the “moment of transition.” We believe that we live in such a transitional period. The most important task of social science in time of transformation is to transform itself into a force of liberation. Kairos, an editorial imprint of the Anthropology and Social Change department housed in the California Institute of Integral Studies, publishes groundbreaking works in critical social sciences, including anthropology, sociology, geography, theory of education, political ecology, political theory, and history.

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TWELVE

Stop Making Capitalism

I

In Mary Shelley's famous story, Dr. Frankenstein creates a creature, which then acquires an independent existence, a durable existence in which he no longer depends on the creative activity of Dr. Frankenstein. In another story, by Jorge Luis Borges, "Las Ruinas Circulares," a man creates another man not in a laboratory but by dreaming. The man created has all the appearance of being a normal man with an independent, durable existence, but in fact he is kept alive only by the constant creative activity, the dreaming, of the first man. His existence is not an illusion but his duration is: his existence depends, from one moment to another, on the creative activity of the dreamer.

The story of Frankenstein is often taken as a metaphor for capitalism. We have created a society that is beyond our control and that threatens to destroy us: the only way we can survive is by destroying that society. But perhaps we should think rather in terms of the Borges story: we have created a society that appears to be totally beyond our control, but that in reality depends upon our act of constant re-creation. The problem is not to destroy that society but to stop creating it. Capitalism exists today not because we created it two hundred years ago or a hundred years ago, but because we create it today. If we do not create it tomorrow, it will not exist.

Each day we create a world of horrors, of misery and violence and injustice. We take an active part in constructing the domination that oppresses us, the obscenity that horrifies us. We create surplus value, we respect money, we accept and impose unreasoned authority, we live

by the clock, we close our eyes to the starving. We make capitalism. And now we must stop making it.

What does it mean to think of revolution not as destroying capitalism but as ceasing to create capitalism?

Changing the question does not solve the problem of revolution, it does not mean that now we know how to do it, but perhaps it can lead us to rethink the categories of revolutionary thought. Perhaps it opens a different grammar, a different logic of revolutionary thought, a different way of thinking about revolutionary politics. Perhaps it opens a new hope. That is what I want to explore.

II

The idea that revolution means destroying capitalism rests on a concept of duration, that is, on the idea that capitalism now is and will continue to be until we destroy it. The problem is that by assuming the duration of capitalism revolutionaries undermine the basis of their own call for revolution.

Any system of domination depends on duration, on the assumption that because something exists in one moment it will continue to exist in the next. The master assumes that because he ruled yesterday, he will continue to rule tomorrow. The slave dreams of a different tomorrow but often locates it beyond death, in heaven. She assumes in that case that there is nothing she can *do* to change the situation. The power of doing is subordinated to that which is.

This subordination of doing to being is a subordination of subject to object. Duration, then, is a characteristic of a society in which subject is subordinated to object, a society in which active subjectivity is assumed to be incapable of changing objective reality. Objective reality, or society-as-it-is, stands over against us: subject is separated from and subordinated to object. And verbs (the active form of speaking) are separated from and subordinated to nouns (which deny movement).

Under capitalism the separation of subject and object, and therefore duration, acquires a peculiar rigidity. This is rooted in the material separation of subject and object in the process of production. The commodity we produce stands over against us as something external, as an object that denies all relation with the work of the subject who produced it. It acquires an existence apparently completely separate from the work that constituted it. This separation between subject and object, doing and done, verb

and noun is fundamental to the way that we subjects relate to each other under capitalism, so fundamental that it comes to permeate every aspect of social existence. In every aspect of our lives there is a separation of subject from object, doing from being, a subordination of subject to object, doing to being. Duration rules. This is expressed clearly in clock time, in which one minute is exactly the same as the next and the next and the next and the only revolution conceivable is the one that goes round and round.

To think of changing society, we must recover the centrality of human doing, we must rescue the buried subject. In other words, we must criticise—using genetic criticism, criticism *ad hominem*—the attempt to understand phenomena in terms of the doing that produces them. Marx's labour theory of value is such a criticism: at its core, it says, "The commodity denies our doing, but we made it." With that, the subject (our doing) is restored to the centre of the picture. The object claims to be independent of the subject, but in fact it depends on the subject. Being depends on doing. This is what opens up the possibility that we can change the world.

All criticism (understood in this sense) is an attack on duration. Once subjectivity is restored to the centre of society, duration is broken. It can no longer be assumed that one minute is the same as the next. It can no longer be assumed that tomorrow will be like today, because we may make it different. Criticism opens up a world of astonishment. When Marx says at the beginning of *Capital* that the commodity stands outside us, alien to us, but its secret is that we made it (labour theory of value), then our reaction is one both of horror and of hope. We are astonished that we should spend our lives making objects that deny our existence, that are alien to us and dominate us, but at the same time we see hope, because those objects depend totally upon us for their existence: our doing is at the centre of everything, our doing is the hidden sun around which everything revolves.

The object, which dominates the subject, depends on the subject that creates it. Capital, which dominates us, depends on our work, which creates it. The master who dominates the slave depends on the slave. There is a relation of domination and dependence in which the movement of domination is a constant flight from the dependence, a constant struggle by the master to escape from his dependence upon the slave—an impossible struggle, of course, because if he succeeded he would cease to be master. But in this relation of domination and dependence it is not so much the moment of domination (the traditional arena of left discourse)

as the moment of dependence that interests us, because that is where hope is to be found.

All social phenomena, then, exist because they have been made by people: money or the state are just as much human products as the motor car. But more than that: all social phenomena exist only because they have been made and are constantly being remade. A car exists as a car only because we constantly recreate it by using it as a car; a state exists as a state only because we constantly recreate it by accepting its authority and its forms. Money exists only because we constantly reproduce it in our relations with others. If we stopped reproducing money in our social relations, the paper and the coins would continue to exist, but it would no longer be money. These phenomena are not like Frankenstein's Creature but like the creature produced by Borges's dreamer. They depend for their existence upon us, from one minute to the next.

The existence of capitalism is no illusion. What is an illusion is the separation of its existence from its constitution, in other words, its duration.

Duration, of course, is not just imaginary: it is generated in the real social separation of subject and object in the process of work, so that it is only through a complete transformation of the social organisation of work (doing) that duration can be destroyed. But the attack on duration is central to the attack on the capitalist organisation of work.

To attack duration is to demystify it, to show it to be an illusion. To demystify is to pierce the unreality of an enchanted world and to show that the world really revolves around human doing. However, it feels like just the opposite. We have always lived in the "enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world" of capitalism, the world of objects, of duration, of clock time. Consequently, the world into which criticism introduces us feels like a dreamworld, a Wonderland, a world of impossible intensity, a world in which everything is infinitely fragile because it depends on its constant re-creation.

In this Wonderland-world, in this communist-moving, nouns are dissolved into verbs, into doings. Nouns fetishise the product of doing, they tear the results away from that doing and enshrine them in a durable existence that denies that they are dependent on being constantly recreated. Marx criticised value to show that its core was human activity, work, but his critical method of recuperating the centrality of human doing can be extended to all nouns (but, in the duration-world in which we live, with

its duration-talking, it is difficult to write without using nouns—so that critical thought really requires creating a new talking, what Vaneigem calls the poetry of revolution).

Communism, then, is not the culmination of history but the breaking of the continuum of history (Benjamin), the dissolution of the continuity of nouns into the absolute fragility of human doing. A self-determining society is a society in which it is explicit that only what is being done in the moment exists, a world of verbs. The notion of the culmination of history implies a positive movement, a movement of accumulation of struggle, a movement of extension. Breaking the continuum of history implies a negative movement, not an accumulation of struggles but the generation of new intensities incompatible with the dead identifications of capitalism. Perhaps we should think of totality, that concept that criticises the fragmented nature of bourgeois thought, not as a movement of extension but more as a movement toward the totalising of social existence into the intensity of each particular moment: the pursuit of an absolutely intense *Jetzt-Zeit*, or *Nunc Stans* in which time stops and capitalism explodes, or perhaps implodes. Communism would be a self-determining society, that is, a society without duration, without nouns: a terrifying, exhilarating thought.

III

What we want is a moment of terrible social intensity that shatters the continuum of history, a moment so intense that clock time is broken forever. Such moments occur: revolutions are like that. Everything stops, social relations are turned upside down as people go out on the streets and everything is concentrated in the act of saying NO.

But we cannot wait for the Great Revolutionary Moment. We cannot go on producing capitalism; we must break the continuum of history now. Individually and collectively, we must turn to capital and say, “Go on, now go, walk out the door, just turn around now, ‘cause you’re not welcome anymore. We will survive.” “Go away, capital! ¡*Que se vayan todos!* All the politicians and all the capitalists. You’re not welcome anymore. We will survive.”

To say goodbye to capital is to break a relationship, to start afresh, to create a *tabula rasa*, to make the world anew. Breaking the continuum of history is like breaking the continuum of an oppressive relationship in daily life. While we are in the relationship, it seems impossible,

inconceivable that we should ever break out of it, but it is not. Capital is beating us, killing thousands of us each day, but ¡*Ya basta!* Those who want to build a party and take state power would take us to marriage counselors and the divorce courts before breaking the relationship. But no, we cannot wait. There is no intermediate step. Bye-bye, ciao, as simple as that.

Is it really so simple? No, of course not. But perhaps it is not as impossible as we usually think.

Capital exists because we make it. It depends absolutely on us. This is all-important: if there is no work, there is no capital. We create capital, and it is only by assuming our responsibility that we can understand our strength. Only if we understand that we make capital with all its horrors can we understand that we have the power to stop making it. State-oriented (and hegemony-centred and discourse-centred) approaches lose sight of this crucial axis of dependence: they turn our eyes away from the Achilles' heel of capitalism, its crucial point of vulnerability.

If capital depends upon us, then *refusal* is the key to our strength. If capital exists because we make it, then we must refuse to make it.

A sustained global mass strike would destroy capital completely, but the conditions for that do not exist at the moment. It is hard to see how everybody in the world could be persuaded to refuse to work for capital at the same time.

For the moment at least, the only way of thinking of revolution is in terms of a number of rents, tears, holes, fissures that spread through the social fabric. There are already millions of such holes, spaces in which people, individually or collectively, say, "NO, here capital does not rule, here we shall not structure our lives according to the dictates of capital." These holes are refusals, disobediences, insubordinations. In some cases (the EZLN in Chiapas, the MST in Brazil, the uprising in Bolivia, the piqueteros and *asambleas barriales* in Argentina, and so on), these insubordinations, these holes in the fabric of capital are already very big. The only way in which we can think of revolution is in terms of the extension and multiplication of these disobediences, of these fissures in capitalist command. Some argue that these disobediences, these fissures, acquire real significance only when they are institutionalised in the form of disobedient or revolutionary states, and that the whole movement of disobedience must be channelled toward that end. But there is no reason why disobediences should be institutionalised in state form and very many reasons why they should not.

These refusals are refusals of indignity, affirmations of dignity. Indignity is being commanded by others, being told what to do, as though one did not have the maturity to decide for oneself, in conjunction with others. Dignity then is the refusal of indignity, the refusal of alien command, the affirmation of oneself as part of the drive to social self-determination. There are two moments here: refusal and affirmation, No and Yes, a Yes present in the No. Stop making capitalism and do something else instead.

Refusal itself is not difficult. Most of us find it easy not to go to work under the command of others. Refusal is the crucial pivot in any attempt to change the world. But it is not enough for two reasons. First, refusal to work in present society confronts us immediately with the problem of starvation. If we do not sell our labour power, how do we obtain the means necessary to survive? In the richer countries, it is often possible to survive on state benefits, and this is what many of those in revolt against work do. But state benefits are very limited and in any case do not exist in most countries. Refusal to work under capitalist command is difficult to maintain unless it is accompanied by the development of some sort of alternative doing.

Second, and just as important as the need to avoid starvation, is dignity, the drive toward the social self-determination of our doing. This is the drive to do something that we judge to be necessary, desirable, or enjoyable. This is the struggle of doing against work, of the content against its capitalist form. Even in modern capitalism, where the subordination of doing to capital in the form of work is a very real subordination (or subsumption), there is always a residuum of dignity, of the insubordination of content to form. To be human is to struggle for the insubordination of doing to work, for the emancipation of doing from work. The worst architect always struggles against being converted into the best bee.¹ That is the meaning of dignity.

The struggle of doing against work, that is, the struggle for the emancipation of doing, is an everyday practice. It is common for people to work

1 Marx uses the comparison between architect and bee to distinguish between humans and animals: "A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax." Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin Books, 1990 [1867]), 284.

(or do) in-and-against capital, trying to do well what they do in spite of the capitalist form of organisation, fighting for use value against value. Obviously there are also many jobs in which it is very difficult to see any space for a revolt of doing against work. In such cases, perhaps the struggle of-and-for dignity can be understood only as a struggle of total negation (sabotage and other forms of refusal of work).

But there are clearly many examples that go beyond that of people occupying factories or schools or clinics and trying to organise them on a different basis, creating community bakeries or workshops or gardens, establishing radio stations of resistance, and so on. All these projects and revolts are limited, inadequate, and contradictory (as they must be in a capitalist context), but it is difficult to see how we can create an emancipated doing other than in this interstitial form, through a process of interweaving the different struggles of doing against work, knitting together the different doings in-and-against-and-beyond capital.

The emancipation of doing means the self-determination of doing. This implies some sort of council organisation, some form in which people come together to determine what to do and how to do it. The council (or soviet) tradition has a long history in the communist movement and recurs in different forms in all rebellions. Its central point is the insistence in the collective self-determination of doing. This means the rejection of leadership from outside, the acceptance that people here and now, with all their problems and weaknesses and neuroses, with all the habit inculcated by centuries of domination, should determine their own activity.

In these many experiments (whether or not they are imposed by the necessity to survive), the central theme is not survival but the emancipation of doing, the creation of a doing shaped not by profit but by what the doers consider desirable.

Any revolution that is not centred in the emancipation of doing is condemned to failure (because it is not a revolution). The emancipation of doing leads us into a different time, a different grammar, a different intensity of life. The emancipation of doing is the movement of anti-fetishisation, the recovery of creativity. Only in this way can the fissures become poles of attraction instead of ghettos, and only if they are poles of attraction can they expand and multiply. The revolutions in Russia and Cuba were initially poles of attraction for many who dreamed of another type of life: the fact that there was no real emancipation of doing in these societies meant that they gradually ceased to exert that attraction (although

support and solidarity continue in the case of Cuba). And the same is true of many alternative projects today: if the only result of these projects is that the participants are poor, isolated, and bored, then the projects will not be poles of attraction. If rebellions are not attractive, they will not spread. In other words, ceasing to make capitalism has to be thought of as a realistic project, but if the realism is not a magic realism, it ceases to be realistic.

The struggle of doing against work is a struggle to create a different human richness: one shaped by social desires and not by capitalist appropriation, one that is not appropriated by capital. People produce an enormous richness each day, but nearly all of it is appropriated by capital, so that the only way in which we can have access to that richness is by bending low, bowing to the command of capital. It is easy to refuse to work for capital, but how can we survive without subordinating ourselves to capital?

Any attempt to gain access to the richness of human doing comes up against “property.” Property is not a thing but a verb, a daily repeated process of appropriating the product of our doing. The process of appropriating (which is constantly being extended to new areas of doing) is supported by violence, but it depends greatly on the fetishisation of the process, on the transformation of the verb “to appropriate” into the noun “property.” The resistance to the process of appropriation is part of constructing another doing, a doing that defetishises at the same time as it creates another sociality.

IV

Stop making capitalism: refuse. But this involves a second moment: do something else instead. This something else is a prefiguration, the embryo of a society yet to be born. To what extent can this embryo grow in the womb of existing society?

There are many unavoidable problems, and there is no model solution to apply. But one thing is clear: that we must stop making capitalism now, that we must stop creating the misery, oppression, and violence that surround us. *¡Ya basta!* *¡Que se vayan todos!* The slogans of recent years make it clear that very many people have had enough of capitalism.

After we say, “Go on, now go, walk out the door,” there are still many forces that suck us back into the relationship. Yet the axis of our thought must be not continuity but discontinuity, break, rupture. We must stop

making capitalism now. The problem of theorists is that perhaps we spend our time untying (or even tying) Gordian knots when what we need is to start from the energy of December 19–20, 2001, of Bolivia in October 2003, of January 1, 1994. Not domination but rupture is the centre of our thought.

Rupture does not mean that capitalism vanishes. The fissures do not mean that capitalism disappears. But rather than think of revolution as an event that will happen in the future (who knows when) and be relatively quick, it seems better to think of it as a process that is already under way and may take some time, precisely because revolution cannot be separated from the creating of an alternative world.

We see where we want to go. The new horizon shimmers in the morning mists like an island on the other side of the sea. But we cannot get there by putting stepping-stones and jumping from one step to another to another, building the party, winning control of the state, implementing social reform. That will not work, because the island we see shimmering in the mists is not in the sea but in the sky, and the only way to get there is to fly. It seems impossible until we realise that we are flying already.