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Commodity Fetishism and Revolutionary Subjectivity: A Symposium on John Holloway's *Change the World without Taking Power*. Editorial Introduction

Ever since the publication of works such as Rubin's *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*¹ or Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*,² the emphasis on Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism has been a hallmark of critical traditions of Marxism. According to those traditions, commodity fetishism is the cornerstone upon which depends the understanding of Marx's mature works as a *critique* of political economy (as opposed to an economics, political economy or sociology, no matter how radical or 'Marxist' in their stance).³ The essential element defining these currents of Marxist social theory thus consists in their grasp of Marx's intellectual enterprise as a *critical investigation of the historically-specific alienated forms of social mediation of capitalist society*.

Since the late 1970s, this broadly-understood 'form-analytical' approach has produced plenty of significant theoretical developments. Thus, there have

¹ Rubin 1972.

² Lukács 1971.

³ Clarke 1991a. For discussion of commodity fetishism in this journal, see especially Dimoulis and Milios 2004 and Wayne 2005.

been important contributions to the investigation of the determinations of the value-form,⁴ the state-form,⁵ the legal-form⁶ and, more recently, a renewed interest in Marx's dialectical method.⁷ And, yet, it could be argued that not many works have explicitly put the problematic of *revolutionary subjectivity* at the centre of the critique of political economy.⁸

In his latest book, *Change the World without Taking Power* (Hereafter, *Change the World*),⁹ John Holloway, who has been a major figure in the aforementioned rich and fruitful area of Marxist research, provides a much needed attempt to fill that gap. According to Holloway, the critical investigation of the fetishised social forms of capitalist society is not an abstract, academic discussion, but must be seen as a necessary moment in our radically transformative practice aiming at the negation of alienated social life.¹⁰ As Holloway puts it in the book:

Fetishism is the central theoretical problem confronted by any theory of revolution. . . . Any thought or practice which aims at the emancipation of humanity from the dehumanization of capitalism is necessarily directed against fetishism.¹¹

In this sense, *Change the World* offers a necessary reminder about the eminently *political* nature of the Marxian critique of political economy, which is thereby determined as a theoretical expression of the *practical critique of the inversion inherent in the capital-form* of social relations. If only for this reason, Holloway's recent book should be welcome, deserving a central place in contemporary debates on critical Marxist theory.

But there is another, immediately practical reason adding to the relevance of *Change the World*, namely, the impact that the book has had on radical

⁴ See, among others, the essays contained in Elson 1979, Williams 1988, Arthur and Reuten 1998, Campbell and Reuten 2002, Bellofiore and Taylor 2004.

⁵ Holloway and Picciotto 1978, Clarke 1988, Bonefeld and Holloway 1991, Clarke 1991b.

⁶ Fine 2002 and Miéville 2005.

⁷ Moseley 1993, Moseley and Campbell 1997, Albritton and Simoulidis 2003, Arthur 2002 and the debate around the latter in *HM* 13.2.

⁸ Drawing on the general methodological approach found in the work of Iñigo Carrera (1992 and 2003), I have developed my own reconstruction of the Marxian critique of political economy as an investigation into the social determinations of the revolutionary subjectivity of the working class in Starosta 2005.

⁹ Holloway 2002.

¹⁰ Holloway 2002, pp. 2–3.

¹¹ Holloway 2002, p. 53.

intellectuals and activists, particularly in the Latin-American Left.¹² Thus, for instance, Holloway's book has been a central and direct theoretical reference among some of the more radicalised groups that emerged or became visible during the recent turbulent political and economic crisis in Argentina.¹³

More broadly, and beyond the issue of its direct influence on particular social movements, *Change the World* could be seen as a clear theoretical articulation of certain central political themes that have developed within contemporary movements of global resistance to neoliberalism.¹⁴ First, and most obviously, there is the explicit rejection of the 'conquest of political supremacy' by the working class as a necessary moment in the revolutionary process leading to the abolition of capital (and the state).¹⁵ Secondly, there is also a denial of the need for political action to *self-consciously* take on *class* forms.¹⁶ Whether one sees these two points as expressions of the (actual or

¹² Thus, the great bulk of the debate on Holloway's book has been carried out in pages of the Argentine journal *Herramienta*. It can be found on-line at <www.herramienta.com.ar>.

¹³ See MTD Solano and Colectivo Situaciones 2002, the result of a collaborative work between Colectivo Situaciones (a group of intellectuals influenced by Holloway's and Negri's Marxism, see Colectivo Situaciones 2001) and the MTD Solano (a radical organisation of *piqueteros*).

¹⁴ Certainly, the current so-called 'antiglobalisation' movement is quite diverse and it is possible to find very varied political perspectives within it. Here, I refer to what I think is the *dominant* trend within the movement.

¹⁵ Of course, the argument for the need to conquer state power as necessary moment of the radical transformation of the world does not necessarily lead to a 'statist' view of socialism/communism or to a vanguardist negation of the determination of revolutionary activity as self-emancipation. See, for instance, Chattopadhyay's 1992 excellent textual discussion of Marx's view of the proletarian revolution. As he competently shows (1992, pp. 92–3), for Marx, the revolutionary conquest of political power together with the expropriation of the bourgeoisie were the *necessary forms* in which to *start* the process of transformation of the capitalist mode of production into the free association of individuals. But, unlike the conception found in Lenin and orthodox Marxism generally, Marx was very clear that the political rule of the working class 'does not by itself signify the collective *appropriation by society*, and does not indicate the end of *capital*' (p. 93). The 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was, for Marx, a *period within the capitalist mode of production* – hence, not a non-capitalist transitional *society* – in which the latter was to be entirely revolutionised in every nook and cranny up to the point of fully preparing wage-workers for their self-emancipation – hence for their self-abolition as working class (p. 93).

¹⁶ Against postmodernist thought, Holloway argues that there definitely *is* an underlying *unity* within the multiplicity of different forms of resistance to capital given by the constitutive *class* determination of social antagonism. However, he seems to reject the idea that revolutionary activity should be organised along class lines. According to his approach, this can only lead to the affirmation of working-class *identity*, hence to the reproduction of capital or 'power-over'. Holloway's abandonment of class politics has been subject to criticism not only by traditional or orthodox Marxists, but also by anti-Leninists otherwise more or less sympathetic to his 'Open Marxist' approach. See *Aufheben* 2003 and *Wildcat* 2003.

potential) *strength* of current forms of social struggle or of their *weakness*, they undeniably constitute real aspects of them which cannot be ignored. *Change the World* could be seen as providing either an illuminating set of arguments for those who would like further to develop those two aspects of contemporary social movements, or a sophisticated theoretical challenge for those who are critical of them. Either way, it clearly constitutes a thought-provoking starting point for the necessary and urgent task of theoretical reflection upon current forms of antagonistic political action.

In brief, whether one agrees with it or not, *Change the World* undoubtedly represents an important and suggestive intervention which, one hopes, will contribute to bring the problematic of revolutionary subjectivity back into the theoretical agenda of the critique of political economy. In the context of the publication of a new edition of the book, the editors of *Historical Materialism* once again offer a space for rigorous debate on the issues raised by recent innovative works within Marxism. As with previous symposia in the pages of journal, we hope that the present discussion of Holloway's book will contribute to the further development of current research in critical-Marxist theory.

The symposium

As mentioned above, there are two main issues running through *Change the World*: a) the intrinsic connection between the critique of fetishism and the theory of revolution in Marx; b) the rejection of the classical-Marxist political programme based on the revolutionary conquest of state power by the working class. And it is around those two issues that the different contributions primarily revolve.

Two of the contributions centre their discussion on the concept of *negativity*, which plays a crucial role in the precise way that Holloway tries to go beyond the 'tragic dilemma' of revolutionary thought, namely:

How can maimed, dehumanized, alienated people possibly create a liberated, human society? Alienation signals not only the urgency but also, apparently, the impossibility of revolutionary change.¹⁷

In his article, Stoetzler welcomes Holloway's starting point in negativity for the understanding of subjectivity. However, he subjects Holloway's actual

¹⁷ Holloway 2002, p. 46.

use of the concept throughout the book to critical scrutiny and notes that he actually conflates three different meanings of negativity: human doing in general, ‘screaming’ against domination and effective resistance to domination. According to Stoetzler, this conceptual collapse has serious consequences and actually undermines Holloway’s otherwise commendable attempt at overcoming the view of the revolutionary subject as ‘as wholesome, healthy and sane: the good hero battling against the bad society’.¹⁸ Thus, despite all of Holloway’s efforts to eliminate the externality between human subjectivity and its alienated mode of existence, Stoetzler notes that the notion of an abstract, pure subject keeps being reintroduced through the back door in the argument.

The concept of negativity is also central to De Angelis’s piece. However, unlike Stoetzler, he considers that it is the wrong point of departure for a theory of revolution. In an article which, I think, brings out very clearly the often overlooked difference between ‘autonomist’ and ‘open’ Marxism, De Angelis claims that, rather than negativity, the theoretical starting point for the understanding of revolutionary subjectivity must be the *affirmation* of the multiplicity of needs, aspirations, affects and relations of human subjects. The ‘scream’, ‘negativity’ or the ‘NO’, De Angelis argues, presupposes that the affirmation of an already existing multitude of diverse ‘YESes’ has been frustrated by power-over. Blind to the (onto)logical priority of the positive over the negative in the theory of revolution, De Angelis continues, Holloway fails to pose the central problematic of any attempt radically to change the world, namely: the *alternative organisation* of the ‘yeses’ in the here and now.

The question of organisation and political strategy is a fundamental aspect of Bensaïd’s critical engagement with Holloway’s book. Moreover, he argues that those issues are not only crucial but also need to be grasped *historically*. In fact, Bensaïd thinks that one of the shortcomings of *Change the World* is the way in which he dismisses the rich and complex history of both the revolutionary workers’ movement and revolutionary thought. This, according to Bensaïd, leads Holloway to an untenable and reductionist explanation of the failure of revolution thus far; it all comes down to one and only original sin, namely, *statism*. This, in turn, is seen as the necessary consequence of the fixation with power and its political conquest, to the detriment of struggling for its dissolution. However, Bensaïd argues that a close scrutiny of the concrete

¹⁸ Holloway 2002, p. 104.

history of the revolutionary movement would show Holloway that 'history is more complicated than that' and 'until today there has never been a case of relations of domination not being torn asunder' by the emergence of forms of dual power 'posing the question "who will beat whom"'. Refusal to take state power has only resulted in those aiming at revolutionary change being eventually thrashed by it. Hence, Bensaïd concludes, we may not possess certainty about the forms that revolutionary power will take in the future, but a historical perspective suggests that, in some form or another, the politics of organisation will always be relevant for revolutionary change.

For Michael Lebowitz, Holloway's book represents a profound departure from Marx, both in relation to the centrality of commodity fetishism and in Holloway's rejection of the need to take power. Unlike the previous contributions discussed, Lebowitz considers that commodity fetishism is not as fundamental to Marx's *Capital* as Holloway thinks. In his view, by stressing commodity fetishism Holloway ends up displacing from centre stage what actually does play the fundamental role in Marx's argument: namely, the sale of labour-power and the related concept of exploitation. Regarding the question of the state, Lebowitz resorts to Marx's writings on the Paris Commune and *The Communist Manifesto* to show that, *pace* Holloway, in the specific form of the self-government of the direct producers, the former can and must be used by the working class in its attempt at revolutionary change. And this not only in order to make 'despotic inroads' on capital, but also as a necessary moment of the *self-transforming revolutionary practice* of the working class.

Lebowitz's scepticism about the critical and explanatory power of the concept of fetishism is partly shared by Leigh Binford. Unlike the former, Binford still considers it a central concept; however, he argues that fetishism leaves us at a very abstract level of analysis and that it should be complemented with a reconsidered Gramscian concept of hegemony. The latter would not be simply about consensus and domination but also about struggle. In this sense, it would resemble Holloway's view of fetishism-as-process. However, hegemony would go beyond the latter through the specification of the concrete conditions in which struggles unfold, thus also restoring the balance in the dialectic between 'structure and agency'.

Finally, the symposium includes a reply by Holloway, in which he both offers a concise rendition and re-elaboration of the main arguments of his book and addresses the comments and criticisms put forward in the other papers by his critics.

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