

## Twelve Theses on Changing the World without taking Power

John Holloway

### I

#### 1. The starting point is negativity.

We start from the scream, not from the word. Faced with the mutilation of human lives by capitalism, a scream of sadness, a scream of horror, a scream of anger, a scream of refusal: NO.

Thought, to be true to the scream, must be negative. We do not want to understand the world, but to negate it. The aim of theorising is to conceptualise the world negatively, not as something separate from practice, but as a moment of practice, as part of the struggle to change the world, to make it a place fit for humans to live in.

But how, after all that has happened, can we even begin to think of changing the world?

#### 2. A world worthy of humanity cannot be created through the state.

For most of the last century, efforts to create a world worthy of humanity were focussed on the state and the winning of state power. The main controversies (between ‘reformists’ and ‘revolutionaries’) were about *how* to win state power, whether by parliamentary or by extra-parliamentary means. The history of the twentieth century suggests that the question of *how* to win state power was not very important. In all cases, the winning of state power failed to bring about the changes that the militants hoped for. Neither reformist nor revolutionary governments succeeded in radically changing the world.

It is easy to accuse all the leaderships of these movements of ‘betraying’ the movements which they led. So many betrayals suggest, however, that the failure of radical, socialist or communist governments lies much deeper. The reason that the state cannot be used to bring about radical change in society is that the state itself is a form of social relations that is embedded in the totality of capitalist social relations. The very existence of the state as an instance separated from society means that, whatever the contents of its policies, it takes part actively in the process of separating people from control of their own lives. Capitalism is simply that: the separating of people from their own doing. A politics that is oriented towards the state inevitably reproduces within itself the same process of separating: separating leaders from led, serious political activity from frivolous personal activity. A politics oriented towards the state, far from bringing about a radical change in society, leads to the progressive subordination of opposition to the logic of capitalism.

We can see now that the idea that the world could be changed through the state was an illusion. We are fortunate enough to be living the end of that illusion.

**3. The only way in which radical change can be conceived today is not as the taking of power but as the dissolution of power.**

Revolution is more urgent than ever. The horrors arising from the capitalist organisation of society are becoming more and more intense. If revolution through the winning of state power has proved to be an illusion, this does not mean that we should abandon the question of revolution. But we must think of it in other terms: not as the taking of power, but as the dissolution of power.

## II

**4. The struggle for the dissolution of power is the struggle for the emancipation of power-to (potentia) from power-over (potestas).**

To even think of changing society without taking power, we must make a distinction between power-to (potentia) and power-over (potestas).

Any attempt to change society involves doing, activity. Doing, in turn, implies that we have the capacity to do, the power-to-do. We often use 'power' in this sense, as something good, as when a united action with others (a demonstration or even a good seminar) makes us feel 'powerful'. Power in this sense is rooted in doing: it is power-to-do.

Power-to-do is always social, always part of a social flow of doing. Our ability to do is produced by the doing of others and creates the conditions for the future doing of others. It is impossible to imagine a doing that does not integrate in some way with the doing of others, past, present or future.

**5. Power-to is transformed into power-over when doing is broken.**

The transformation of power-to into power-over implies the breaking of the social flow of doing. Those who exercise power-over separate the done from the doing of others and declare it to be theirs. The appropriation of the done is at the same time the appropriation of the means of doing, and this allows the powerful to control the doing of the doers. The doers (humans, understood as active) are thus separated from their done, from the means of doing and from doing itself. As doers, they are separated from themselves. This separation, which is the basis of any society in which some exercise power over others, reaches its highest point in capitalism.

The social flow of doing is broken. Power-to is transformed into power-over. Those who control the doing of others now appear as the Doers of society, and those whose doing is controlled by others become invisible, without face, without voice. Power-to-do no longer appears to be part of a social flow, but exists in the form of an individual power. For most people the power-to-do things becomes transformed into its opposite, powerlessness, or, at most, the power-to-do things determined by others. For the powerful, power-to-do becomes transformed into power-over, the power to tell others what to do, and therefore a dependence upon the doing of others.

In present society, power-to exists in the form of its own negation, as power-over. Power-to exists in the mode of being denied. This does not mean that it ceases to exist. It exists, but it exists as denied, in antagonistic tension to its own form of existence as power-over.

## **6. The breaking of doing is the breaking of every aspect of society, every aspect of ourselves.**

The separation of the done from the doing and from the doers means that people relate to one another no longer as doers, but as owners (or non-owners) of the done (seen now as a thing divorced from doing). Relations between people exist as relations between things, and people no longer exist as doers but as the passive bearers of things.

This separation of doers from doing and hence from themselves is variously referred to in the literature as alienation (the young Marx), fetishism (the older Marx), reification (Lukács), discipline (Foucault) or identification (Adorno). All of these terms make it clear that power-over cannot be understood as something external to us, but that it reaches into every aspect of our existence. All of these terms point to a rigidification of life, a damming of the social flow of doing, a closure of possibilities.

Doing is converted into being: this is the core of power-over. Whereas doing means that we are and are not, the breaking of doing means that the 'and are not' is torn away. We are left just with 'we are': identification. 'We are not' is either forgotten or treated as mere dreaming. Possibility is torn from us. Time is homogenised. The future is now the extension of the present, the past the preparation for the present. All doing, all movement, is contained within the extension of what is. It might be nice to dream of a world worthy of humanity, but that is just a dream: this is the way things are. The rule of power-over is the rule of 'that is the way things are', the rule of identity.

## **7. We participate in the breaking of our own doing, the construction of our own subordination.**

As doers separated from our own doing, we re-create our own subordination. As workers we produce the capital that subordinates us. As university teachers, we play an active part in the identification of society, in the transformation of doing into being.

When we define, classify or quantify, or when we hold that the aim of science is to understand society as it is, or when we pretend to study society objectively, as though it were an object separate from us, we actively participate in the negation of doing, in the separation of subject and object, in the divorcing of doer from done.

### **8. There is no symmetry between power-to and power-over.**

Power-over is the breaking and negation of doing. It is the active and repeated negation of the social flow of doing, of the we who constitute ourselves through social doing. To think that the conquest of power-over can lead to the emancipation of that which it negates is absurd.

Power-to is social. It is the constitution of the 'we', the practice of the mutual recognition of dignity.

The movement of power-to against power-over should not be conceived as counter-power (a term which suggests a symmetry between power and counter-power) but rather as anti-power (a term which, for me, a complete a-symmetry between power and our struggle).

## **III**

### **9. Power-over appears to penetrate us so deeply that the only possible solution seems to be the intervention of a force from outside. This is no solution at all.**

It is not difficult to reach highly pessimistic conclusions about present society. The injustices and the violence and the exploitation scream at us, and yet there seems to be no possible way out. Power-over seems to penetrate every aspect of our lives so deeply that it is hard to imagine the 'revolutionary masses' once dreamed of. In the past, the deep penetration of capitalist domination led many to see the solution in terms of the leadership of a vanguard party, but this proved to be no solution at all, as it simply replaced one form of power-over with another.

The easiest answer is pessimistic disillusion. The initial scream of rage at the horrors of capitalism is not abandoned, but we learn to live with it. We do not become supporters of capitalism, but we accept that there is nothing that can be done about it. Disillusion is a falling into identification, an acceptance that what is, is; an active participation, then, in the separation of doing and done.

### **10. The only way to break the apparently closed circle of power is by seeing that the transformation of power-to into power-over is a process which necessarily implies the existence of its opposite: fetishisation implies anti-fetishisation.**

Most discussions of alienation (fetishism, reification, discipline, identification and so on) treat it as though it were an accomplished fact. They treat the forms of capitalist social relations as though they were established at the dawn of capitalism and will continue until capitalism is replaced by another mode of social organisation. In other words, existence is separated from constitution: the constitution of capitalism is located in the historical past, its present existence is assumed to be stable. Such a view can only lead to a deep pessimism.

If, however, we see the separation of doing and done not as an accomplished fact but as a process, then the world begins to change. The very fact that we speak of alienation means that alienation cannot be complete. If separation, alienation (etc) is understood as a process, then this implies that its course is not pre-determined, that the transformation of power-to into power-over is always open, always at issue. A process implies a movement of becoming, implies that that which is in process (alienation) is and is not. Alienation, then, is a movement against its own negation, against anti-alienation. The existence of alienation implies the existence of anti-alienation. The existence of power-over implies the existence of anti-power-over, or, in other words, the movement of emancipation of power-to.

That which exists in the form of its negation, that which exists in the mode of being denied, really exists, in spite of its negation, as the negation of the process of denial. Capitalism is based on the denial of power-to, of humanity, of creativity, of dignity: but that does not mean that these cease to exist. As the Zapatistas have shown us, dignity exists in spite of its own negation. It does not stand on its own, but exists in the only form in which it can exist in this society, as struggle against its own negation. Power-to exists too: not as an island within a sea of power-over, but in the only form in which it can exist, as struggle against its own negation. Freedom too exists, not in the way that liberals present it, as something independent of social antagonisms, but in the only way it can exist in a society characterised by relations of domination, as struggle against that domination.

The real, material existence of that which exists in the form of its own negation, is the basis of hope.

### **11. The possibility of changing society radically depends on the material force of that which exists in the mode of being denied.**

The material force of the negated can be seen in a number of ways.

Firstly, it can be seen in the infinite number of struggles which do not aim at winning power-over others, but simply at asserting our own power-to, our own resistance against being dominated by others. These take many different forms, from open rebellion to struggles to gain or defend control over the labour process, or the processes of health or education, to the more fragmented, often silent, assertions of dignity (by children or women) within the home. The struggle for dignity, for that which is denied by existing

society, can be seen too in many forms that are not overtly political, in literature, in music, in fairy tales. The struggle against inhumanity is ubiquitous, for it is implicit in our very existence as humans.

Secondly, the force of the negated can be seen in the dependence of power-over upon that which it negates. Those whose power-to lies in their capacity to tell others what to do always depend for their existence on the doing of those others. The whole history of domination can be seen as the struggle of the powerful to liberate themselves from their dependence on the powerless. The transition from feudalism to capitalism can be seen in this light, not just as the struggle of the serfs to free themselves from the lords, but as the struggle of the lords to free themselves from their serfs by converting their power into money and so into capital. The same search for freedom from the workers can be seen in the introduction of machinery, or in the massive conversion of productive capital into money capital, which plays such an important part in contemporary capitalism. In each case, the flight of the powerful from the doers is in vain. There is no way in which power-over can be anything other than the metamorphosis of power-to. There is no way in which the powerful can escape from their dependence upon the powerless.

This dependence manifests itself, thirdly, in the instability of the powerful, in the tendency of capital to crisis. Capital's flight from labour, through the replacement of labour by machines and by its conversion into money, is confronted by its ultimate dependence upon labour (that is, upon its capacity to convert human doing into abstract value-producing labour) in the form of falling rates of profit. What manifests itself in crisis is the force of that which capital denies, namely non-subordinate power-to-do.

## **12. Revolution is urgent but uncertain, a question and not an answer.**

Orthodox-Marxist theories sought to win certainty over to the side of revolution, arguing that historical development led inevitably to the creation of a communist society. This is fundamentally misconceived, because there can be nothing certain about the creation of a self-determining society. Certainty can only be on the side of domination. Certainty is to be found in the homogenisation of time, in the freezing of doing into being. Self-determination is inherently uncertain. The death of the old certainties is to be welcomed as a liberation.

For the same reasons, revolution cannot be understood as an answer, but only as a question, as an exploration in the creation of dignity. Asking we walk.

### **Note:**

This argument is developed much more fully in my book, [Change the World without taking Power](#), Pluto Press, London, 2002 (ISBN 0745318630 for paperbacks and 0745318649 for hardbacks). To order, visit the Pluto website: [www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)