

Crack capitalism or reclaim the state

Wednesday 2 March 2011, by [HOLLOWAY John](#), [WAINWRIGHT Hilary](#) (Date first published: 20 February 2011).

In a fascinating debate, two leading Left intellectuals John Holloway and Hilary Wainwright debate the potential for democratising the state, how labour can be empowered to enact change, and how capitalism is best confronted. [Transnational Institute]

John Holloway writes...

Dear Hilary,

Capitalism is a catastrophe for humanity. This is so simple, so obvious that it hardly seems worth repeating – and yet it is important to say it over and over again: capitalism is a catastrophe for humanity.

The way in which our social relations are organised (the way in which human activities are connected) produces a dynamic that nobody controls and which creates injustice, violence and human degradation and now threatens to destroy human life altogether.

In your book you quote Walden Bello as saying: ‘Neoliberalism is like the train conductor who gets shot in an old Western and dies with his hand on the accelerator. He’s dead but speeding the passengers inexorably towards total disaster.’ But it is not just neoliberalism: it is capitalism that is the problem, a system in which the social connections are established through money and the driving force is the pursuit of more money, profit.

How do we stop the train and get off? How do we break the dynamic of capitalist development that is rushing us towards the abyss? That is the problem. That is the question for all anti-capitalists, communists, socialists, anarchists, people, whatever we want to call ourselves.

Your book is about democracy – an excellent, exciting, enjoyable book about democracy. But democracy is not the main issue. As long as capitalism exists, the dead train driver’s hand remains on the accelerator and democracy is effectively reduced to ensuring a more equitable distribution of seats within the carriage. This is not unimportant: it may well bring about real improvements in the living conditions of the passengers (as the various examples that you discuss undoubtedly did), but it diverts attention from the fact that the dead driver’s hand continues to rush us towards disaster, and continues to generate injustice and destruction all along the way. In order to remove the driver’s hand, we need to challenge capitalism, the current organisation of human activity – but in your discussion of democracy there is virtually no mention of capitalism.

I see your protagonist-passengers in a different light. For me they are not just organising to improve the quality of their seat on the train, they are banging on the windows and screaming to get off, or perhaps all running in the wrong direction in the hope that they can force the train into reverse.

You speak, for example, of the Exodus collective in Luton, who start organising free raves in the Marsh Farm estate and then gradually become drawn into the arduous process of applying for and administering a £50 million New Deal for Communities grant for the improvement of the estate. This

led to real improvements, as you say, but I cannot help feeling that in the raves there is something more than an attempt to improve life within capitalism.

In the rave there is a scream of refusal, a breaking of windows, a walking in the wrong direction, a creation of social relations on a basis other than money. This is what I call a 'crack' in capitalist social relations: a conscious or not-so conscious misfitting, a refusal-and-creation, a refusal to go with the capitalist flow and an attempt to establish life on a different basis here-and-now.

In the rave there is a contradiction between fitting and misfitting: a tension between 'let's get the kids off the streets and give them a good night out' and 'let's explode against a world in which the reality principle is identical to money'. How do we relate to this tension? Which side do we take? It is very clear from your various accounts that the state in all cases is a (sometimes more, sometimes less responsive) process of taking these situations and making them fit in to the prevailing system. It is not just a question of granting concessions, but of drawing the people into the process of decision-making. Those who were previously excluded are brought in, included. The state is democratised, the state is reclaimed by the people. Those who were previously the objects of policy become its subjects.

Yet the subjects who result from the processes you describe are very limited in their subjectivity. They become (at best) subjects of policy, but not subjects of social determination. The policies that they are allowed to influence are located within an unquestioned and unquestionable context of capitalism, of private property and profit and all that flows from that.

You might say that this could be seen as a first step towards a fully emancipated subjectivity, a real shaping of society from below. This might be so if such advances in democratisation were seen as part of a movement in-against-and-beyond capitalism, in which the issue of rupture remained central. But in your accounts there is no hint that this might be so. At the end of the book I am left with the feeling of being entrapped: certainly things can be made better, but nobody in your book seems to think that another world might be possible, a world without government grants and bureaucrats, without money and profit, without capital.

My argument is just the opposite. I think there is a profound and growing rage against the rule of money. This can be seen in the student movement of recent months, the refusal to accept that education should be completely determined by money. But the rage is not just expressed on the streets but in the million ways in which people repudiate the shaping of every aspect of their lives by money and try to create or strengthen other ways of doing things, other ways of being with people, other ways of thinking.

These revolts, these refusal-and-creations, are so many cracks in the logic of capitalist cohesion, so many ruptures in the rule of money, so many explosions against a world of destruction. That is the exciting side of the raves on the estate: not that they can be the starting point for a better fitting into the structures of capitalism, but rather their potential as an explosion of misfitting.

To fit in to a society of death is to die ourselves. Let us misfit and grow in our misfittings and let our misfittings flow together. That is surely the only way in which we can pose the question of breaking this world and creating another one.

Rage now, rage against the rule of money!

John

Hilary Wainwright replies...

Dear John,

Thanks for your challenges! First I want to share some thoughts stimulated by your book *Crack Capitalism*. One reason I found it so exciting was because we seem to share a common starting point – where we differ is over challenges thrown up by practice. I share your sense of the dangers we face, of walls closing in. At the same time, like you, I can see cracks opening up and being pushed wider.

I agree too that to open and spread the cracks we need to find ways of gathering our combined strengths that don't presume or aspire to a single unifying centre or totalising vision but instead value the multiplicity of different struggles and initiatives for change. I will put my disagreements in ways that build on the foundations of our agreement.

Running through the book is a fundamental question: is there a way of understanding global capitalism and the millions of revolts against its daily indignities that conceptualises a shared predicament and helps us to converge or connect to create another world?

To answer this question you rightly go back to Marx's central thesis that labour, under capitalism, has a dual nature. On the one hand, labour is abstract labour, involved in producing commodities for the market, objectified as value, expressed in the exchange of commodities for money, from which capital extracts profit. On the other hand, is the dimension of labour which you call 'doing', the labour involved in the production of use value, concrete and particular, social and individual.

Under capitalism, the two forms of labour are, as you stress, in constant tension with each other: creative, purposeful activity is subordinated to labour disciplined to the maximisation of profits; potentially self-determining activity versus alienated labour.

Turning this latent tension into a revolt and a revolt which over-flows throughout society is, you argue, the impetus shared by contemporary anti-capitalist struggles. As you declare, 'the future of the world depends on splitting open the unitary character of labour.' I agree strongly with your argument, perhaps because it reaffirms and takes forward the breaks that we made in 1968 with both the paternalism and the commercialism of the post-war order.

But while one theme of 1968 was the revolt against alienated labour; another, also taken further in today's struggles, was the revolt against one-dimensional, electoralist citizenship. I was inspired by your development of Marx's analysis of the dual nature of labour to apply the method to analysing the dual nature of citizenship. This leads to identifying cracks in state institutions that, contrary to what you seem to be arguing, we can and must open up in the process of breaking capitalism.

So here goes: you are right in your analysis of the dominant character of state institutions and their relationship to society: how they separate and fragment economics from politics, community provision from the community, citizens from each other and from their social context.

If however, we carry out an analysis of the dual nature of citizenship, we see that your description captures only one, albeit the dominant, dimension of citizenship. Such an analysis would lead us to contrast the atomised, abstract nature of citizenship underpinning parliamentarist institutions with the potential of citizens as social subjects.

The latter dimension is illustrated historically by the original struggles for the franchise, by situated subjects, that is propertyless male workers and women fighting for the suffrage to be universal. A contemporary example would be the way that, across the world, people are struggling for the promise of political equality to be realised through opening up narrowly electoral institutions and subjecting public power to direct forms of participation in the political decisions previously the secret domain of deals between the political elite and private business. (This has been the impetus behind many experiments in participatory democracy, especially in Latin America.)

We could talk here about subject citizenship or socialised citizenship versus atomistic citizenship. A very recent example of such socialised citizenship would be the movements, including parts of the trade unions, resisting privatisation across the world, often with alternative proposals for how services should be organised to respond to the diversity of social need.

Here are citizens organised as subjects, opening the crack between the state's stewardship of public money and capital's need for new markets and new sources of profit. In many such movements, the assertion of subject or socialised citizenship is fused with the revolt against abstract labour. How else to understand what is happening when workers link up with communities to defend and improve the public services they deliver against marketisation?

The ways in which these struggles, and also new networks of the digital commons, are often organised leads me to a further area of disagreement. It concerns your dismissal of institutions per se – your apparent unwillingness to consider the possibility and reality of different kinds of institutions.

I'd like to believe, like you, in the flow, the dance, the moving of movements, but I've come to believe that flows need foundations and conditions of a more enduring kind. The flow of citizens' movements against privatisation of public goods, for example, needed the 'backbone', as one Uruguayan activist in the movement for public water put it, of the trade union confederation born two decades earlier in the struggle against the dictatorship. Similarly, the flow of relationships in the open software movement is conditional on the institutional framework provided by the GNU General Public License.

I'll end with a thought that underlies my insistence here on the institutional dimension. It is surely important to distinguish between two levels of social being: enduring social structures on the one hand and social interaction and relationships between individuals on the other. Whereas the traditional left tended to think only in terms of structures, treating human beings as the carriers or products of social structures, not valuing or even recognising our capacity to act as knowing subjects and alter the structures of which we are part, I feel that you veer in the other direction, presuming only relationships and not taking account of the ways in which structures both pre-exist individuals and depend on them/us for their reproduction.

You have an infectious sense of how we make our own history – since it is 'we who create this society,' you rightly insist, 'we can stop doing it and do something else'. But you don't take account of the fact that we make history 'not in conditions of our own making', as the old man said.

Hilary

John Holloway

Dear Hilary,

Many thanks for your letter, which goes directly to two central points: the state and institutions in general. First the state. There is, as you say, a basic agreement that state institutions in general 'separate and fragment, economics from politics, community provision from the community, citizens from each other and from their social context.'

And then you say: 'If however, we carry out an analysis of the dual nature of citizenship, as Marx did on the dual nature of labour, we see that your description captures only one, albeit the dominant, dimension of citizenship. Such an analysis would lead us to contrast the atomised, abstract nature of citizenship underpinning parliamentarist institutions with the potential of citizens as social subjects.' Here I both agree and disagree.

The state in general is a form of organisation developed over the centuries to exclude, divide and fragment, and to reformulate social discontent in such a way as to reconcile it with the reproduction of capitalism. Within this general framework, there are certainly many who walk in the wrong direction, breaking through these inherited forms, creating different forms of organising and behaving.

Many of us who are teachers in state institutions, for example, try to do that: we struggle in-against-and-beyond the state trying open a world beyond capitalism. For me, this is part of the movement of doing against abstract, alienated labour. In your terms, this is the movement of socialised against atomised citizenship: my only problem with this formulation is that the word 'citizenship' binds the struggle to the state, which is the form of social relations that we are trying to break – we need to go beyond the state and therefore beyond citizenship.

The constant struggle in-against-and-beyond the state is central to all our lives (even if we are not employed by the state, we come into constant contact with it). In this I see the state as a tremendous sucking: it constantly sucks us back into conformity with a society ruled by money. Or perhaps as a giant fishing net that hauls in our discontents and then subordinates them to the logic of capital: by the language used, the formfilling, the million ways it offers us money if only we formulate what we want in a certain way, and by the cuts in expenditure.

The cuts are not directed against the state but are fundamental to the way that the state works: it hauls us in by promising us resources and then says 'sorry, the economic situation means that we cannot give you what we promised', and then we try to defend ourselves, but of course defence, if it is no more than that, means placing ourselves squarely within the logic of the state.

The state is this movement of expansion-and-contraction: to defend the state against the cuts makes no sense at all. To fight for doing (or humanity, or communism) from wherever we are, in-against-and-beyond the state, is the anti-capitalist struggle of everyday life.

In this I distinguish between a situational contact with the state, where we try to go beyond the state because we are already in it, as employees or recipients of grants or benefits, and a sought contact with the state, where we try to enter it (as elected representatives, say) and turn it in our direction.

In the first case, the struggle in-against-and-beyond the state is inevitable, that is where we live. In the second case, I feel that the sucking force of the state is so strong that we will not be able to go far in that direction without abandoning our anti-capitalist perspective. It may make sense as a hit-and-run operation, an attempt to achieve something quickly and get out again, but not as a long-term venture, in which case it soon becomes a career option and any anti-capitalist perspective is suppressed.

In all this, it is important to think of our movement as a movement of rupture against capitalism and not just as a movement for democracy.

Briefly on the second point, the question of institutions. You say that you too like movement, flowing, dance but that in practice we need an institutional backbone. Perhaps, rather, we are now cripples who need institutional crutches, but learning to walk properly is a throwing off of our crutches.

Our moving is an anti-institutional moving. Possibly we need to create institutions (or habits) along the way, but if we do not subvert those institutions in the moment of creating them, they are likely to turn into their opposite. The flow of rebellion is a moving one no one controls: if we try to establish rules to direct it, we are likely to find that the movement itself breaks those rules.

John

Hilary Wainwright responds

Dear John,

Thanks for pushing me further on the relation between struggling against what I would call 'alienated politics' – the state, including elected, institutions – and the struggle against alienated labour.

We both agree that the struggle in-against-and-beyond the state is about trying open a world beyond capitalism. Our disagreements are about to what extent the sucking or alienating character of state institutions can be resisted and state institutions used, warily, in the struggle for a world beyond capitalism.

First, I'd make a general point about citizenship, the state and politics. Citizenship is about rights in a shared community – initially a city, then a nation-state, now possibly international institutions. If – and just now it looks like a pretty big 'if' – there is the possibility of a world without states, and 'the state withers away' – that surely is not the end of politics? Of collective decision-making about resources, priorities, rules, laws, standards, and so on that inevitably involves relations of power? It would be the end of the state as a separate, dominating power, but there would still be politics and therefore citizenship of some kind.

In the forms of organisation and – I insist – self-determined institutions that we create to resist alienation in all its forms, aren't we aiming to pre-figure in our own organisations a different kind of citizenship? A citizenship where when we elect people (and we will need forms of both representation and delegations) who don't then turn that very power we lent them back against us – who won't, in other words, present politics as an alienated form.

In talking of the organisations that we create now, I'd like to bring in the issue of autonomy and kind of institutions we create to achieve that autonomy. Autonomous organisations – from the state and from capital – are a condition for the possibility of struggling to control and go beyond the state.

Marx illustrated this in his analysis of the struggle for the eight-hour day in late 19th century Britain. He showed how workers' organisational capacity – driven by their shared interest, cohesion, numbers, the dependence of the ruling class on their votes and their labour – enabled them to develop an autonomous source of political power in both the workplaces and the wider society. This power was used to divide employers and political parties and win legislation that reduced hours of alienated labour.

This was a legislative gain: a gain in and against and potentially beyond the state, not only in terms of improving the lives of working people, but, more important for our argument, for enhancing their autonomous political capacity – giving them more time to communicate, debate, read, think and organise.

This brings me to the struggles that have been taking place on Marsh Farm estate: from the raves struggling with the police, the breweries and the council to provide an alternative to the commercial rip-offs of Luton town centre, through the occupied empty hospice as an autonomous housing action zone, to 'occupying the rhetoric' of New Labour's New Deal for Communities to ensure resident control of public money allocated to the 'regeneration' of the estate. In this latter struggle they sought to engage with the state on their own terms.

After 18 years of being in-against and- beyond the state, the community activists of Marsh Farm don't see themselves as 'sucked in', as you imply. On the contrary, they see themselves as, in their

own words, 'reclaiming public resources from these top-down bandits, putting them to use to replace the capitalist structures which dominate our community with far more effective and socially useful ones'.

A key condition of this has been constantly developing an autonomous organisation, vigilantly resisting all pressures to 'mimic the oppressor', in the words of Paulo Freire, someone the community cite as a guide. Like you, they insist on 'learning by doing'. You should meet them!

What you'd see is that crucial to their modest transformative power, as with the historic case of the workers fighting for the eight-hour day, has been the link between the bargaining power of the franchise, the minimally democratic element in the state and the autonomous organisation, values and perspectives of people struggling for social justice in their workplaces and communities.

One of the reasons why the traditional social democratic approach to socialism - gaining state power and then controlling capital - always fails is because in the end social democratic governments, when it comes to the production of wealth, have always depended on capital. And a crucial reason for this is that they never recognise their own allies - working people - as knowing, self-determining subjects with the capacity to be producers and organise a different kind of economy.

This view, embedded in the institutions of social democratic parties and trade unions as they are presently organised, places working class people as simply voters, sources of support, wage earners. The idea that they should share power or link with people or organisations outside of parliament is therefore precluded; they, the politicians, are the engineers of change, and everyone else is excluded from the process.

We can't stand by and leave political institutions to those who want to be free of the pressures of the power of self-determining citizens. We need to occupy those institutions where we can while at the same time organising to replace them.

Hilary

P.S.

* From TNI:

<http://www.tni.org/article/crack-capitalism-or-reclaim-state>

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Hilary Wainwright is a leading researcher and writer on the emergence of new forms of democratic accountability within parties, movements and the state. She is the driving force and editor behind Red Pepper, a popular British new left magazine, and has documented countless examples of resurgent democratic movements from Brazil to Britain and the lessons they provide for progressive politics.

As well as TNI fellow, she is also Senior Research Associate at the International Centre for Participation Studies at the Department for Peace Studies, University of Bradford, UK and previously research fellow at the Centre for the Study of Global Governance at the London School of Economics. She has also been a visiting

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Wainwright founded the Popular Planning Unit of the Greater London Council during the Thatcher years, and was convenor of the new economics working group of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly from 1989 to 1994.