

# Class Struggle is Asymmetrical

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John Holloway

Atilio Borón's article, raises with exemplary clarity issues that are central to the discussion of communist strategy today. It is because I disagree with him (as he disagrees with me) that I write this short reply.

For me the central issue is the asymmetry of class struggle.

Any discussion of power or 'taking power' in capitalist society is clouded unless we see that the term 'power' conceals two diametrically opposed senses. These are sometimes distinguished by talking of *potentia* and *potestas*, but I would prefer to speak of power-to and power-over.

By 'power-to' I mean our capacity to do things. This is a sense which we often use when we say, for example that we feel powerful, or that the women's movement has given women a sense of their own power. Power-to is always social: our doing always depends on the doing of others, in the present or in the past, and our doing normally creates the conditions for the doing of others. Power-to refers to the social flow of doing.

In capitalism (or indeed in any class society, but it is capitalism that interests us here), power-to is metamorphosed into power-over. Power-over is the rupture of the social flow of doing. Those who exercise power-over separate the done from the doing and from the doer and say 'this is mine'. This done is the precondition for the doing of others, so that those who appropriate the done have appropriated the conditions of doing (the 'means of production') and are then able to command the doing of others. When the done is separated from the doing, the capacity to do (power-to) is transformed into power-over, the capacity to tell others to do. For those 'others' power exists as powerlessness. Doing is still social, but its social character is denied by the form in which it exists. Power-over is based on the negation of the social character of doing (its subordination to private property).

The term 'power' thus conceals two antagonistic movements. On the one hand, power-over is a movement of separating, separating the done from the doing, the done from the doer, the doers from each other, the doers from the social flow of doing. Capital, in other words, is the metamorphosis of power-to into power-over. 'Separation', says Marx, is the 'real generation process of capital'. (1972, p. 422) On the other hand, power-to can only be a movement against its present existence as power-over, a movement of unification, a movement to restore or create the direct character of the social flow of doing. Our struggle is the struggle of power-to, the struggle of capital is the struggle to metamorphose power-to into power-over. The two struggles are fundamentally asymmetrical. Their struggle is to separate, our struggle is to unite. Our struggle is not the struggle of counter-power: it is the struggle of anti-power (see Holloway 2001).

In any class society, the rupture of the social flow of doing (the metamorphosis of power-to into power-over, in other words) involves the use of force. Capitalism is distinguished from previous class societies by the fact that the force necessary to ensure the appropriation of the done is focussed not on the doers but on the done (property). In capitalism, the doers are formally equal to the

appropriators of the done (the capitalists), so that the use of force is focussed on the protection of the appropriators' property. This can be done effectively only when the use of force to protect the process of separating done from doing is separated from the immediate process of separating done from doing. In other words, capitalist domination implies the separation of the state from the process of exploitation, the political from the economic (a separation which constitutes both the political and the economic as such). The very existence of the political (or the state) is a necessary part of the process of separating done from doing which is the metamorphosis of power-to into power-over. The state, then, is not the locus of power. The state, rather, is one moment of the separation of done from doing which is the metamorphosis of power-to into power-over, one moment, in other words, of the fetishisation of social relations. The fact that the state appears to be the locus of power merely reflects the fact that political science and sociology take the separation of done from doing as their starting point, as something so obvious that it does not require to be seen. This is not altered by the expansion of the state which, of course, is a feature of neo-liberalism just as much as of previous forms of capitalism.

Why all this in what is meant to be a simple, quick reply to Atilio Borón's article?

The fundamental point is that our struggle is and must be asymmetrical to the struggle of capital. Capital is capital not by virtue of what it does but by virtue of how it does it, by virtue of the form of social relations which it is. Capital forms of organisation are never neutral: they always participate in the process of separating, which is capital. Capital constantly invites those who oppose it to come on to its terrain of organisation. Clever spider. "If you oppose us, then organise a party and win control of the state by election. If you cannot do that, organise an army to defeat us and win control of the state that way. If that is too extreme for you, then form a NGO and help to advise us in the process of policy formation." The existence of capitalist politics is an invitation to make our struggle symmetrical to the struggle by capital. That is realistic, we are told: capitalist power is organised in this way and to defeat it, we must adopt its methods. But once we accept that invitation, the struggle is already lost before it even begins. Capitalist forms of organisation are not neutral. They are fetishised and fetishising forms: forms which deny our doing, forms which treat social relations as things, forms which impose hierarchical structures, which separate us one from the other, forms which make it impossible to express our simple refusal, our simple NO to capitalism.

If we take part in the political without questioning the political as a form of social activity, then, no matter how 'progressive' our policies, we are actively participating in the process of separation which is the capital we are supposedly struggling against. To say, then, as Atilio does in the first of his objections to my argument, that the state is "the predominant form of organisation of the oppressors" is not an argument for struggling through the state, as he supposes, but, on the contrary, an argument for developing other forms of struggle. Atilio speaks of "an essential characteristic of the capitalist state: its role as organiser of the capitalists' domination and, simultaneously, as disorganiser of the subordinate classes". He is quite right, and it makes no difference who is "in control" of the state.

Borón's other objections also fall. To say, as I did, that "the states are not the centres of power" that they appear to be, is not to fall into neo-liberal theory but simply to refer back to Marx rather than Lenin and Gramsci. According to Marx, it is capital, that is, the separating of done from doing, which is the centre of power. The multiplicity of states which exist can be understood only in relation to this basic process of separation (capital accumulation).

Similarly, capital is, and always has been, an a-territorial and therefore a global relation: this follows from the fact that the relation of exploitation is mediated through money. To think of capital as being national capital is, and always has been, absurd: it is to think of capital as a thing rather than a social relation (see Holloway 1995). Again, to say that Lenin made a clear distinction between "the

beginnings of revolution" and "the development of the revolutionary process" reinforces the problem rather than resolving it. My argument is precisely that this distinction cannot be made. We cannot say that it is necessary first to adopt capitalist methods (fighting for power) in order afterwards to go in the opposite direction (dissolving power). History screams at us that this does not work: the Stalinist Thermidor is already present in Lenin's distinction between beginning and development.

Our struggle is and must be asymmetrical to the struggle of capital (I have said this before, but it is worth repeating). This does indeed mean thinking of our struggle as an anti-politics, simply because the very existence of the political is a constitutive moment of the capital relation. Anti-politics is necessarily experimental, simply because the movement of capital is a constant movement to impose symmetry, to institutionalise and integrate anti-capitalist forms of struggle. Being experimental, it is inevitably prone to error, which is precisely why criticism is important, as Atilio points out (and I share some of his hesitations). However, this criticism too must be part of the experiment, part of the search for new forms of struggle which do not in any way mirror those of capital. To criticise the zapatistas for "their lack of interest, both theoretical and practical, in the indispensable political mediations that are required by a movement interested in constructing a new world, not just socialism", is to repeat unwittingly what the Mexican governments have been saying since the first of January 1994. There are no "indispensable political mediations", or rather the only "indispensable political mediations", are the acceptance of symmetry, the acceptance of capitalist domination.

Yet, in spite of all this, Atilio appears to have realism on his side. He situates his argument "on the more prosaic terrain of politics and not on that of philosophical abstractions", and on this prosaic terrain it is absurd, he says, to think that the struggle for power is a capitalist method.. But, speaking in prose, what has the struggle for power achieved in the last hundred years? The miserable oppression of the Soviet Union, the corruption of social democratic governments, the millions of corpses of the national revolutionary movements. What else? Bitterness and disillusion in all the world. That is surely why, everywhere, and with the zapatistas as an inspiration, people are now exploring forms of struggle that deliberately avoid the "indispensable political mediations", forms of struggle that are not aimed at the winning of power but at the dissolution of power (Holloway 2002).

It is a grave mistake to think, as Borón apparently does, that in the zapatista uprising "behind a beautifully poetic discourse", there is another "hidden [and prosaic] revolution" which simply continues the old revolutionary tradition. It is a grave mistake, not because there do not exist distinctions and contradictions within the zapatista movement, but because it is a deliberate closing of the eyes to the idea that there might be something radically new in the zapatista uprising, something that does not fit into the tired and failed patterns of left thinking.

The great joy of the zapatista movement is that they have shown that in the darkest days of defeat new struggles arise, and that new struggles mean new ways of thinking and new forms of doing things that are experimental, creative, asymmetrical.

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