



Preface: at a distance from the state

John Holloway

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PREFACE

Preface: at a distance from the state

The state closes. Kills hope. Probably nowhere more clearly than in South Africa, but everywhere: the state is disillusion; pushes us into cynicism; makes us die before we are dead.

South Africa was a symbol of hope in all the world for many, many years. A symbol of dreadful oppression it is true, but this very oppression was always linked to hope. The hope that one day, the dreadful, hateful system of apartheid would be defeated and everything would be different. Certainly that was the image for so many of us outside South Africa, but I imagine it was even more so for those who lived there; who breathed the oppression and fought for a better country.

Where did this hope go? And where is it now, after Marikana? Is this the country everybody wanted to see? What happened?

I would argue that the state killed hope, and that it always does. I do not say 'the ANC', or that it was the fault of Mandela, or Zuma. One could explain it in personal or local terms, of course (and yes, certainly Mandela and Zuma and the African National Congress (ANC) are somewhat to blame), but when one looks at one country after another and sees similar things happening (sometimes better, sometimes worse, always disappointing), one has to look for a more general answer. There must be something about the state as a form of organisation, as a way of operating that systematically destroys hope.

The most obvious thing about the state is that it sends us home. In situations of intense struggle for change, such as South Africa, or Bolivia, or Russia, once the old regime falls, the new regime sends everyone home. Thousands of people have devoted their lives (and often their deaths) to struggling for change, and once it seems to be happening, and the movement has conquered control of the state, the state says in effect: 'thank you very much, you can all go home now, we'll look after things. You can show your support for this arrangement by voting for us'. This is not necessarily said with malice: it is just the way that the state works. The state is, in its most obvious sense, a number of paid officials charged with governing. By assuming responsibility for the running of society, the state excludes society from self-government.

One obvious effect of this is that it weakens the capacity of those officials to do anything very meaningful. The fall of the old regime in each case mentioned seemed an impossible task, but it was achieved by the combined efforts of millions. And when the millions are sent home, the full-time officials who remain, no matter how strong their commitment to radical change may be, cannot have the same force to bring about change.

The exclusion of the people implicit in the existence of the state is just the opening into another problem. It is not just the state that is the problem, it is that all states are embedded in world capital, and are obliged to do everything possible to promote the accumulation of capital in their territories. If not, capital will move elsewhere, the state will lose its own revenue, and the material welfare of the population will suffer as investment and employment fall. Any state, however radical the proclamations of its leaders

(at least initially), is confronted with the fact that, in a capitalist world, access to material wealth depends on subordination to capital. Money rules: the state is trapped in this reality, and does not have the strength to break it, since it has already sent everybody home.

Yet hope arises, again and again. Perhaps it would die, if capital could just let us stew quietly in our dull conformism, having lobotomised all hope of a radically different world. But capital is incapable of doing this: it cannot stay still. Capital has the constant drive to expand itself through accumulating profit, and to achieve this it must attack us again and again: telling us in the universities that we are not working hard enough and not making an adequate contribution to the system; attacking us in the factories, urging us to work harder; telling peasants on the land that the world has no place for them, besides the slums of the cities; telling whole communities they must be destroyed to make way for mines and dams.

Capital is constant aggression, and against this aggression springs resistance, and often this resistance spills over into rebellion, and fills us with the hope that we can construct a world that is not based upon subordination to the state and capital.

Rebellion then faces a dilemma. It can take the obvious path of turning to the state. However, while it is possible to achieve small changes through the state, it is not possible to break from the rule of capital, to break the destructive dynamic that is capital.

This is why more and more movements throughout the world have been turning away from the state, and the idea of changing the world through the state. More and more movements of resistance and rebellion have been developing various forms of politics at a distance from the state. A difficult and uncertain path, but there is no other way to go. Or rather: difficult and uncertain paths, because there is no one path. And while there are definitely paths in the plural, these are not paths that we can follow: they are paths that have to be created, paths that are made by walking on them. And they are paths that go away from, that reject, the current destructive organisation of society, and say 'No! Enough!' to the deadly logic of capital.

But paths that go away from have to go somewhere. So where do they go? Here are four suggestions. Firstly, a path away from has a direction. The impulse is 'No! Enough! We do not accept this system that is attacking us personally, and destroying the preconditions of human existence. Therefore, we do not accept the forms through which this system exists, such as the state and money.' This initial 'No!' is very important, if we are to avoid the danger that confronts any struggle: being sucked back in to the system.

Secondly, our paths may have no definite goal, but they have a method. 'Asking we walk', say the Zapatistas. We shape our path through a process of asking, a constant process of discussion to decide which way we go. This already involves the rejection of hierarchy and alien determination, the rejection therefore of the state as a form of organisation. By the way we walk we are already creating the world we want to go to, a world of self-determination.

Thirdly, we may not have a pre-defined goal, but we do follow a utopian star. Our 'No!' to the violence of capitalism draws strength from the dreams of the ages, from our practices, imaginings, projections and longings for a different society in which we determine our own activity, a world based on the mutual recognition of ourselves as humans striving for our own humanity. This is no blueprint, but a movement towards the overcoming of that which negates us.

Fourthly, this utopian star is not outside us, but simply the recognition of the rebellion within us and an understanding of that rebellion as a historical and social reality. To explore a politics at a distance from the state is to open our eyes to our own traditions. The movement of resistance-and-rebellion against capitalism has always had its own political forms, its own forms of organisation far removed from the state: the tradition of councils, communes and assemblies that arises again and again as each new movement tries to find ways of articulating its anger and its dreams.

It is a great pleasure, then, to take part in this exploration and rediscovery of a politics of resistance-and-rebellion at a distance from the state, both during the initial 'Politics at a Distance from the State' conference in which I was honoured to be a participant, along with various academics, activists and movements, and in this special issue, which was inspired by that conference.

The repudiation of the state as a form of political organisation, the recognition that the state is part of the deadly dynamic of capital, moves with different rhythms in different parts of the world. The particular history of South Africa, the uniquely intense way in which the hope for radical change was concentrated on the state, gives a particular significance to this special issue and to its opening on to a different politics. It is an honour, and an excitement, to take part.

John Holloway

Instituto de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades "Alfonso Vélaz Pliego", Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Puebla, Mexico

✉ johnholloway@prodigy.net.mx