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**Holloway’s Marxism**

*Change the World without Taking Power* is a work of (anti?)power, imagination and even optimism. One might well argue that it is precisely what we need in these dark times, marked by imperialist wars, a recrudescence of racism and unprecedented ethnic strife. To assert that ‘we’ are powerful, that ‘we’ are deserving, and that, however bad things appear, ‘we’ can change them, offers a strong message of hope that can, indeed, potentially inspire action. But I will argue in this short essay that, despite the message and the seemingly rigorous manner in which it has been developed, *Change the World* fails in its principal mission of outlining an approach to Marxism that improves on earlier formulations. To arrive at the critique, a brief exegesis of the text is in order.¹

According to Holloway, capitalist fetishisation has an ontological point of origin in the separation of worker from the means of production and the production of goods for sale on the market. Under capitalism, the worker is alienated from the product

¹ I wish to thank Marcus Taylor for saving me from several egregious errors and prodding me to elaborate on points previously un- or underdeveloped. I have also brazenly appropriated several of his ideas. Of course, the errors that remain, egregious and otherwise, as well as any misrepresentations of the purloined intellectual property remain my responsibility.
of her collective labour, which she re-encounters in a fetishised form through the exchange of products on the market. In the workplace, she experiences labour as differentiated and specific use-values; in the marketplace, she encounters products that, whatever their use values, are exchangeable with one another:

Relations between doers really are refracted through relations between things. . . . These things are the fetishized forms of the relations between producers, and, as such, they deny their character as social relations. 

Once this system of production becomes dominant, it pre-shapes every aspect of our vision of the world. We remain fetishised creatures – at least immersed in a process of struggle over fetishisation – as long as capitalist production persists. Because fetishisation is constitutive of human beings as subjects, all individual resistance and progressive movements for change develop within the process and not outside it. Thus, Holloway argues:

The concept of fetishism (rather than any theory of ‘ideology’ or ‘hegemony’) thus provides the basis for an answer to the age-old question, ‘Why do people accept the misery, violence and exploitation of capitalism?’ . . . Fetishism is the central theoretical problem confronted by any theory of revolution.

Fetishisation converts capital into a decentred, capillary power that saturates society and culture, but it is also an internally contradictory process that contains the seeds of its own negation. Holloway refers to that negation as defetishisation, which is a product of ‘the scream’ or resistance. Resistance or the scream are not positive forces, but refusals to accept things as they are. If fetishisation throws up rock-hard images and fixed concepts that disrupt what he calls ‘the social flow of doing’ (social process), defetishisation negates these images and concepts in order to restore the flow. If fetishisation identifies, names and defines social relations so as to take capitalism out of history and make it appear permanent, defetishisation rejects identities, refuses names and undermines definitions.

The conceptual apparatus as described has numerous implications. First, the capillary forms of power and power’s decentred nature, as well as its role as constitutive of biological humans as social beings, implies that power

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2 Holloway 2002, p. 49.
3 Holloway 2002, p. 53.