WHAT IS A CREDIBLE PERSPECTIVE OF REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE?

An important book about the issue of how to transform the character of capitalism in a progressive manner has been written by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams: ‘Inventing the Future’ (Verso, London 2016) This work analyses the possibilities to change capitalism in a progressive manner and so realise a more emancipatory type of society. They outline the issues involved in trying to establish the aspects of how change within capitalism can be realised. But this approach is also connected to an understanding of the ability of the defenders of the present economic system to be able to undermine the generation of the influence of the supporters of progressive change. Hence the argument made for the aim of changing capitalism into a post-capitalist society is connected to a recognition of the potential established by the very development of the present economic system: “Through popular political control of new technologies, we would collectively transform our world for the better. Today, on one level these dreams appear closer than ever. The technological infrastructure of the twenty first century is producing the resources by which a very different economic and political system could be achieved….Many of the classic demands of the left – for less work, an end to scarcity, for economic democracy, for the production of socially useful goods, and the liberation of humanity - are materially more achievable than at any other point in history.”(p1-2) However the point is that there is a contradiction between the potential expressed by the social and economic development of society and the actual character of the social system which is based on the domination of capital. In other words it is primarily the ideological hegemony of the defenders of the capitalist system which explains its continuation rather than this situation being the expression of an inherent superiority of the present type of economy. In this context the authors suggest that the recent period has been characterised by the failure of mass struggles of protest concerning aspects of the character of capitalism. It is being suggested that the aspect of the role of collective struggles about limited aims to try and achieve progress within the present social system are increasingly characterised by failure. The militant movements of what can be defined as folk politics is an expression of futility in the present period. This situation is connected to the limited character of the role of contemporary militant struggles: “Against the abstraction and inhumanity of capitalism, folk politics aims to bring politics down to the ‘human scale’ by emphasising temporal, spatial and conceptual immediacy. At its heart, folk politics is the guiding intuition that immediacy is always better and often more authentic, with the corollary being a deep suspicion of abstraction and mediation. In terms of temporal immediacy, contemporary folk politics remains reactive (responding to actions initiated by corporations and governments, rather than initiating actions); ignores long term strategic goals in favour of tactics (mobilising around single issue politics or emphasising process); prefers practices that are often inherently fleeting (such as occupations and temporary autonomous zones); chooses the familiarities of the past over the unknown of the future (for instance the repeated dreams of a return to ‘good’ Keynesian capitalism); and expresses itself as a predilection for the voluntarist and spontaneous over the institutional (as in the romanticism of rioting and insurrection).”(p10-11) But it also has to be suggested that the very challenges posed by the necessity to make progress in relation to mass struggles will also create the possibility to make analysis of the possible alternatives to capitalism. The very radicalisation of the forms of opposition to capitalism can provide motivation for the development of an understanding of what could replace the domination of the present social system. Indeed, it could be argued that without these mass struggles the issue of the influence of the socialist alternative will be limited to the role of the small Marxist groups. In other words, there is not an inevitability that the influence of folk politics will not become contested and in this manner the possibility of alternatives to capitalism can become the logical expression of the radicalisation expressed by the aspect of mass struggles. The point is that there is a necessity to develop the role of a Marxist party which would be able to promote the importance of an alternative in a principled and effective manner, but this is the very possibility that the authors do not seem to consider to be a realistic possibility as an outcome of the role of popular discontent with the present system.

In other words, it is being suggested that dynamic mass activity can express the dynamics of a process of effective social change and in this manner the aspect of the role of a revolutionary party can be replaced by the importance of the role of the people in a process of struggle in order to realise radical change. It could be argued that this aspect has increasingly characterised the character of political struggle in the contemporary era. But it also has to be suggested that this development whilst it may have resulted in the radicalisation of the people involved in the various forms of political activity has also not been successful in being able to achieve genuine social change. In other words, there is still no alternative to the importance of the role of a revolutionary party which is able to promote the aspect of a programme of radical change. Instead, the expression of popular discontent has often occurred without being the conscious expression of an objective of radical change. This has meant that whilst people are often aware of what they consider to be economically and politically unacceptable within the capitalist system they are still not supportive of the objective of an alternative and emancipatory type of society. In this context the influence of revolutionary parties which advocate an alternative to capitalism has often been marginal or reduced to them being an expression of the objective of limited aims that can be feasibly realised within the present social system. Indeed this point is made by the authors in terms of the influence of what they define as folk politics or the politics of protest: “In terms of spatial immediacy, folk politics privileges the local as the site of authenticity…habitually chooses the small over the large (as in the veneration of small scale communities or local businesses); favours projects that are unscalable beyond a small community (for instance, general assemblies and direct democracy); and often rejects the project of hegemony, valuing withdrawal or exit rather than building a broad counter-hegemony. Likewise folk politics prefers that action be taken by participants themselves – in its emphasis on direct action, for example, and sees decision making as something to be carried out by each individual rather than by any representative. The problem of scale and extension are either ignored or smoothed over in folk political thinking.” (p11) But this description of the character of folk politics does not establish whether it represents a credible strategy for change. It could be suggested from this description that folk politics is able to articulate the discontent of the people with the capitalist system whilst also implicitly expressing the rejection of the necessity to establish a genuine alternative in terms of the development of a different social formation. In other words, people know what they are against, which is the social system represented by global capitalism, but they do not as a result uphold the importance of the aim of establishing an alternative. Instead, as the authors outline the consciousness of the various forms of discontent with capitalism is defined in terms of a politics of activism which can be defined in the following terms: “Finally, in terms of conceptual immediacy, there is a preference for the everyday over the structural, valorising personal experience over systematic thinking; for feeling over thinking, emphasising individual suffering, or the sensations of enthusiasm and anger experienced during political actions; for the particular over the universal, seeing the latter as intrinsically totalitarian; and for the ethical over the political – as in ethical consumerism, or moralising critiques of greedy bankers. Organisations and communities are to be transparent, rejecting in advance any conceptual mediation, or even modest amounts of complexity. The classic images of universal emancipation and global change have been transformed into a prioritisation of the suffering of the particular and the authenticity of the local. As a result, any process of constructing a universal politics is rejected from the outset.” (p11) But what this emphasis on the localist and spontaneous character of popular discontent and mass actions does not seem to establish is the level of adequacy of this type of politics. Will the culmination of these local types of struggles be a process of progressive change or instead could it be suggested that these actions will result in failure in relation to an inability to realise the objectives of the participants in these actions? In an ambiguous manner the authors are undecided about the level of effectiveness of this folk politics. They contend that all types of political activity will have a folk character, but they also contend that it is necessary to go beyond folk politics. Therefore, they ambiguously contend: “Therefore, the point is not simply to reject folk politics. Folk politics is a necessary component of any successful political project, but it can only be a starting point…. folk politics is only a problem for particular types of projects, those that that seek to go beyond capitalism. Folk political thinking can be perfectly well adapted to other political projects: projects aimed solely at resistance, movements organised around local issues and small scale projects……Given the nature of global capitalism, any post capitalist project will require an ambitious, abstract, mediated, complex and global approach – one that folk capitalist projects are incapable of providing.” (p12) But this comment seems to represent a strategic dilemma. On the one hand all forms of mass struggle are likely to acquire the character of folk politics, and yet this approach is unable to express and promote the realisation of the primary and principled aim of overcoming the domination of global capitalism and so establishing a social alternative. In an ambiguous manner it is concluded that whilst folk politics is a necessary and inevitable aspect of the process of struggle against capitalism, it is also necessary to recognise its limitations: “Combining these qualifications, we can therefore say that folk politics is necessary but insufficient for a postcapitalist political project. By emphasising and remaining at the level of the immediate, folk politics lacks the tools to transform neoliberalism into something else. While folk politics can undoubtedly make important interventions in local struggles, we deceive ourselves when we think that these are turning the tide against global capitalism. They represent, at best, temporary respite against its onslaught.” (p12) But the problem that the authors will have to try and tackle is how can it be possible to go beyond the limitations of folk politics if this is the approach which is the most logical expression of the immediate aspirations of the workers. It would seem to be the most credible option for the workers to try and reform capitalism in terms of the influence of their militant actions and opinions. In this context the aim of an anti-capitalist society would seem to be the objective of left-wing intellectuals who are essentially indifferent concerning the issue of trying to improve the character of capitalism in a progressive manner. It could be suggested that the dynamic aspect of folk politics can achieve genuine progress in relation to being able to achieve reforms and social progress within the capitalist system. However, the period of austerity and the connected offensive of capital against the gains of labour would seem to undermine the credibility of the perspective of gains being made by the dynamism of folk politics. But this aspect does not result in developing the influence of an alternative approach of revolutionary Marxism. Instead, it would seem that capital has been able to achieve consistent supremacy in relation to its aim of achieving continual domination over labour within the relations of production. In this context it would seem that there is a strategic and ideological crisis of the approach of Marxism and revolutionary socialism. The balance of class forces seems to favour the interests of capital and as a result the very politics of anti-capitalism seemed to have become seriously discredited. This means that even the attempt to establish the credibility of a limited type of folk politics is undermined by the importance of what is an adverse balance of class forces that seems to favour the interests of capital rather than that of labour. In this context it would seem that the only realistic type of politics is one that is based on the acceptance of the domination of capital within the economy and society. Hence the important aspect of socialist strategy would seem to be about how to develop the struggles of the workers so that they can develop an effective challenge to this situation of the domination of capital. This would mean the elaboration of what could become an effective expression of a struggle of defence of the interests of the workers against the offensive objectives of capital. But it could be suggested that this type of perspective has not been established in a credible manner. Instead, the various theorists of socialism have tended to impose a conception of reality onto the actual economic and political situation. In other words they have not begun with the importance of the aspect of the offensive of capital against the interests of labour. It could be suggested that whilst Srnicek and Williams are aware of this situation they also tend to impose a conception of reality onto the actual situation that means they do not sufficiently comprehend the importance of this unfavourable balance of class forces. This point will be an important aspect of the critique of their perspective. Instead, they define the character of the political situation in terms of an inability of folk politics to be able to respond to the challenges posed by the objectives of capital: “Why is it that folk political tendencies, for all their manifest flaws, are so seductive and appealing to the movements of today? At least three answers present themselves. The first explanation is to see folk politics as a response to the problems of how to interpret and act within an ever more complex world. The second, related explanation involves folk politics as a reaction to the historical experience of the communist and social democratic left. Finally, folk politics is a more immediate response to the empty spectacle of contemporary party politics.” (p13) But we could suggest in replying to this negative evaluation of folk politics is that this aspect has to be an integral component of any viable popular mass politics. This is because folk politics attempts to establish the immediate interests and aspirations of the people and so in this manner represents the potential to develop an emancipatory perspective of change. The standpoint of folk politics expresses the articulation of the discontent of the people and so in this manner expresses the objectives of anti-capitalist aims that can attempt to represent an alternative to the continued domination of the system. It is also true that folk politics is not sufficient in order to develop a strategy of progressive change, but we also have to begin with folk politics if people are to develop the motivation and aspiration for the development of the transformation of the character of society. In other words, folk politics is an expression of the objectives of anti-capitalism and the connected aspiration to try and realise an alternative type of society. But the authors consider that the approach of folk politics is mistaken because it attempts to render capitalism accessible to control by the people by transforming it into an expression of a small scale economy, but this approach is unrealistic and is unable to recognise the global scale of capitalism: “Considered in all these ways, folk politics appears as an attempt to make global capitalism small enough to be thinkable – and at the same time to articulate how to act upon this restricted image of capitalism. By contrast, the argument of this book is that folk political tendencies are mistaken. If complexity presently outstrips humanity’s capacities to think and control, there are two options: one is to reduce complexity down to a human scale; the other is to expand humanity’s capacities. We endorse the latter position. Any postcapitalist project will necessarily require the creation of new cognitive maps, political narratives, technological interfaces, economic models and mechanisms of collective control to be able to marshal complex phenomena for the betterment of humanity.” (p16) But surely there is no contradiction between folk politics and what constitutes a principled perspective of progressive change. It is necessary to appeal to the folk aspirations of the people if the possibility of popular support for the transformation of society is to be developed. In other words, the standpoint of folk politics is a possible expression of the connection between the local and immediate interests of the people which can be connected to more international aspirations for the creation of a generalised system of post-capitalism. Hence folk politics and its emphasis on the importance of the local and immediate interests of the people need not be in conflict with the expression of the aims of achieving the transformation of capitalism into a socialist type of society. Instead, folk politics is the mediation between the aspirations of the people that are established by the limitations of capitalism and the long-term aim of achieving the transformation of society into an expression of the end of the aspect of domination and exploitation. Hence folk politics becomes the dynamic mediation between the immediate and long term aims of the workers to ultimately establish a more progressive type of society. This means that folk politics is not a diversion from the aims of achieving the creation of a principled politics based on the aspiration of a post-capitalist society. Instead, it could be the basis of the beginning of a process of the development of a radicalised type of politics that could represent the potential to create movements that are based on the expression of a perspective that is able to generate a challenge to capitalism in an effective manner.

Indeed, it is accepted by the authors that the ultimate legacy of folk politics is complex and contradictory. They comment: “The legacy of these social movements was therefore two-sided. The ideas, values and new desires articulated by them had a significant impact on a global level; the dissemination of feminist, anti-racist, gay rights and anti-bureaucratic demands remains their strongest achievement. In this, they represented an absolutely necessary moment of self-critique by the left, and the legacy of folk political tactics finds its appropriate historical conditions here. Simultaneously, however, an inability or lack of desire to turn the more radical sides of these projects into hegemonic ones also had important consequences for the period of destabilisation that followed. While capable of generating an array of new and powerful ideas of human freedom, the new social movements were generally unable to replace the faltering social democratic order.” (p19) But were these problems an expression of the apparently inherently limited character of the new social movements, or was it instead because of the problems involved in trying to develop a credible strategy that could facilitate the realisation of progressive change? It could be argued that the very creation of the role of the new social movements, and the connected folk politics, was an expression of the aspiration of change which had been generated within contemporary capitalist society. In this manner the importance of folk politics was an indication of the potential to create the possibilities for the creation of a new type of emancipatory society. Therefore, the issue was not about how to replace folk politics with a more effective type of political organisation, but instead about how to connect the various organisations of folk politics with a more effective strategy for the transformation of society. Furthermore, the task would seem to be about connecting the various forms of folk politics with the traditional organisations of the workers such as political parties and trade unions. In this manner the expression of the contemporary importance of folk politics would be able to acquire a more effective and superior mode of organisation and this aspect would be connected to a credible type of strategy for progressive change. Indeed, the authors accept the development of the popularity of folk-politics, but they still cannot accept that it could become practical and effective in relation to realisation of its aims. Instead in an ambiguous manner they comment: “The apparent plausibility of folk politics rests on the collapse of traditional modes of organisation on the left, of the co-optation of social democratic parties into a choice-less neoliberal hegemony, and the broad sense of disempowerment engendered by the insipidness of contemporary party politics. In a world where the most serious problems we face seem inextricably complex, folk politics presents an alluring way to prefigure egalitarian futures in the present. On its own, however, this kind of politics is unable to give rise to long-lasting forces that might supersede, rather than merely resist, global capitalism.” (p22) But surely if folk politics can articulate popular discontent with capitalism this aspect also implies that it could become the basis of the development of forms of effective opposition to the domination of the present economic system? In other words, there is not an inherent limitation that undermines the development of the possible effective opposition to folk politics to the domination of capitalism but that instead what is actually problematical is the character of the present politics of these movements. Therefore, instead of supporting a dogmatic rejection of the importance of folk politics we should instead attempt to connect these movements to the development of support for a more effective programme of change. It would be problematical to imply that folk politics is inherently limited and cannot realise radical change, and instead attempt to try and establish how this type of movement can become more effective and so able to promote the possibility of genuine radical change. The point is that sectarian criticism of folk politics will not mean that it becomes superseded by a more effective form of political organisation. Indeed, folk politics will continue to be an expression of popular discontent within contemporary capitalist society. Therefore, the aim should be to reject the dogmatic expression of the denial of the necessity of folk politics, and instead we should attempt to connect this type of popular movement with support for a more effective strategy of change. In this manner the perspective is that of developing the potential of folk politics rather than trying to deny its necessity and importance in a sectarian and elitist manner.

The authors suggest that an important problem with many of the activist movements of the present period is that they have a vague perspective of the rejection of the importance of power, but that this understanding is not connected to the expression of a constructive alternative conception of society: “At the heart of these movements lies a rejection of the state and other formal institutions, and a privileging of society as the space from which all radical change will emerge. Horizontalism rejects the project of hegemony as intrinsically domineering, putting forward an affinity-based politics in its stead. Rather than advocating an appeal to or takeover or takeover of the vertical power of the state, horizontalism argues for freely associating individuals to come together, create their own autonomous communities and govern their own lives.”(p26) But the implicit criticism of this approach is questionable because what is being expressed by the role of the movements of opposition to the domination of capitalism is the justification of the aim of the attempt to create a different type of society based on genuine principles of participatory democracy. Indeed the authors outline that the various activists have established a credible perspective of change based on adherence to the following principles: “1. Rejection of all forms of domination. 2.An adherence to direct democracy and/or consensus decision making. 3.A commitment to prefigurative politics. 4.An emphasis on direct action.” (p27) This perspective implies a possible credible strategy of change based on the creation of the importance of mass popular struggle in order to achieve aims that can result in the genuine transformation of the character of society. But it also being suggested by the authors that these objectives are not likely to be achieved because of the generally small scale and often localised character of the process of mass struggle against aspects of capitalism: “The reality of complex, globalised capitalism is that small interventions consisting of relatively non-scalable actions are highly unlikely to ever be able to reorganise our socioeconomic system.”(p29) This point may be generally correct but it could also be suggested that often what could be considered to be limited and localised mass struggles could become the basis to develop more generalised and effective forms of collective action. For example, the struggle against the Poll tax in the late 1980’s in the UK became the basis to challenge the very domination of the Conservative government and so expressed the possibility of radical change. Only the end of the Poll tax paradoxically meant the denial of this radical logic to the potential of this type of popular struggle. In other words, the various forms of mass struggle that develop in opposition to aspects of the policies of various types of bourgeois government are not inherently futile and may result in successes that pose the possibility of making further radical changes. The point is the necessity to develop a credible perspective that can relate the dynamism of mass struggles with the ultimate objective of attempting to achieve the transformation of society.

However, instead of this type of approach the authors seem to suggest that the very problem is the ambitious approach of various forms of mass movement, a standpoint which expressed by the following comment about the Occupy protest: “More fundamentally, though Occupy constrained itself by enforcing a rigidly prefigurative politics. The basic prefigurative gesture is to embody the future world immediately – to change our ways of relating to each other in order to live the postcapitalist future in the present. The role of occupations is a classic example of this: they often self-consciously aim to enact the space of a non-capitalist world through mutual aid, rejection of hierarchy and rigorous direct democracy. Yet these spaces are understood and built as explicitly temporary – not spaces for sustained change or the working out of concrete alternatives, let alone ambitious competitors to global capitalism. Instead they are short term spaces containing the transitory experiences of an immediate community.” (p34) But surely the very experience of collective and popular mass struggle can express the possibility of the development of the basis of alternatives to the continued domination of capitalism? The ability of mass action to realise forms of collective organisation and expression of possible alternatives to the present system could become the inspirational basis to establish a type of society that is radically different to capitalism. In other words the very aspect of collective action raises the potential for the development of alternatives to the present system in terms of the expression of values of solidarity.

However, the authors consider that the very perspectives of many of the struggles of a localised character has meant a connected inability to facilitate the possibility of overcoming the domination of capitalism. They comment: “The image of Occupy that emerges here is of a movement that was wedded to certain assumptions about the benefits of local spaces, small communities, direct democracy and temporary autonomy at the margins of society. In turn, these beliefs rendered the movement incapable of expanding spatially, establishing sustainable transformations and universalising itself. The Occupy movements achieved real victories in creating solidarity, giving a voice to disenchanted and marginalised people, and raising public awareness…. The proximate cause for the movement’s failure was state repression…..But the structural causes were built into the assumptions and practices of the movement. Without the central focus of the occupied spaces, the movement dispersed and fragmented. Ultimately, the organisational forms of these movements could not overcome the problems of scalability and construct a form of persistent power capable of effectively resisting the inevitable reaction of the state……If a truly ambitious left politics is to take on global actors….they operating beyond the merely local is essential.”(p36-37) This criticism of the strategic limitations of these contemporary protest movements may have validity but it could also be suggested that what is necessary is to connect the various movements that emerge with support for a more effective perspective of genuine radical change. In other words, the very importance of movements like Occupy is that they express the potential to establish the development of successful mass forms of political activity that could result in the generation of the realisation of a change in the balance of forces in favour of the interests of the people. Hence it would seem to be a constructive task to try and develop a perspective that could result in the success of the activity of organisations like Occupy. The result of these developments may mean the generation of popular mass struggles in favour of trying to transform the character of society. What is being suggested is that the role of organisations such as Occupy is not inherently futile but instead they could express the development of a more generalised process of change if they become connected to the aspirations of the people in a more popular manner. In other words, the task is not to provide an alternative to Occupy in terms of the role of political organisation but instead to try and connect these types of popular organisations with the sentiments of the people in a more effective and popular manner. In these terms Occupy could have become the basis of the generation of a more generalised struggle for changing the character of society. Therefore, the task of politics is not to either uncritically support Occupy or to reject its role in a rigid manner, but instead what is required is to try and establish how these types of militant movements could become the effective expression of a process of generalisation of mass struggle against capitalism. The point is that Occupy possibly had this type of potential, but it was unable to realise this prospect because of important strategic limitations based on the uncritical acceptance of a form of non-political activism. It was necessary for Occupy to develop a more strategic emphasis and in that manner become the basis to generate more generalised struggle against capitalism. The popularity of Occupy meant that it had this potential, but it was unable to realise this possibility because of important strategic problems. In Britain the struggle against the poll tax had a potential to become a radicalised opposition to capitalism but this prospect was never realised because of the limitations of the leadership of this movement. In other words the problem is not with the role of the various militant struggles but instead that the objectives they uphold and promote are not connected with the objective of establishing effective opposition to the domination of capital. Hence the problem is not with the role of the mass struggles but is instead about the limitations of the strategies they adopt in relation to the aspect of the development of activity against the objectives of various bourgeois governments. Therefore, rather than considering that the role of groups like Occupy are inherently problematical, what is actually a problematical issue concerns the strategies of activism and political aims they adopt.

In other words, the standpoint of movements like Occupy is the view that it is possible to realise radical change by the role of militant struggle that will in and of itself be able to establish a process of the development of the acceptance by the ruling class of the aims of this movement. In this manner it is being suggested that it is possible to change the objectives of the social formation without the necessity of the success of a connected perspective for the transformation of society. But the problem with this approach is that whilst the illusions of successful radical change seem to be credible in terms of the expression of the aspect of militant struggle, the point is that the result of this aspect does not actually create this type of result. The problem is not the expression of the role of the movement for change but instead the illusions that have been generated that activism can result in the transformation of the character of society. Hence this perspective is not connected to the role of a revolutionary perspective of change that would be able to alter the balance of class forces in favour of the movements of protest. Hence the actual problem is that of relating the role of militancy to a more credible perspective for the transformation of society. It is naïve to suggest that the aspect of protest can be sufficient in relation to trying to achieve the acceptance of aims of movements like Occupy. Instead, the role of protest has to be connected to a perspective for the changing of the character of society. But this would mean that movements like Occupy would have to acquire increasing popular support from the working class and as a result acquire a social basis to challenge the domination of the present system. In other words, Occupy would have had to been able to go beyond merely being a protest movement and instead become an expression of the possibility for establishing a different type of society. But as the author’s comment: “Like the general assembly of Occupy, they enabled people to have a newfound voice. But even when joined together in inter-neighbourhood assemblies, they never approached the point of replacing the state, or of being able to present themselves as a viable alternative. The functions of the state – welfare, healthcare, redistribution, education and so on – were not about to be replaced by the horizontalist movement, even at the height of participation. It thus remained a localised response to the crisis.” (p38) But it could be argued that the potential of these movements of popular discontent was not realised, and that if they have become more generalised and influential it could have been possible to establish the credibility of a strategy of change. In other words, these mass movements had the potential to become a more effective expression of the potential for the transformation of the character of society. It was necessary to change the emphasis on protest into becoming a more conscious and coherent conception of a perspective for the transformation of society. But the authors seem to imply that these very militant movements of protest are problematical because of an emphasis on the approach of horizontal-ism, or a perspective of direct action: “In the case of both neighbourhood assemblies and worker-controlled factories, we see the primary organisational models of horizontal-ism are insignificant. They are often reactive tactics fail to compete in the antagonistic environment of global capitalism. On a theoretical level, and in the actual experiences of Occupy and Argentina, the limits of horizontalism have been made repeatedly clear over the past decade. Whilst recognising the important capacity of horizontalist tactics to provide small scale support to communities and to temporarily disrupt certain exploitative practices, the commitment to fetishized versions of consensus, direct action and particularly prefigurative politics, constrains the possibilities of expanding and overtaking existing social systems.”(p39) But this apparently pessimistic view seems to deny the potential of the various mass movements to go from beyond localised forms of struggle and so becoming more popular and effective types of expression of the possibility of change. Surely the task is not to deny the potential of these movements in the dogmatic manner of the authors but to instead suggest a strategy that would enable the mass struggles to become more effective and so able to transform society.

The authors also suggest that the popular emphasis on the role of local types of struggles as the basis of realising progressive change is also problematical: “The problem with localism is that, in attempting to reduce large scale systemic problems to the more manageable sphere of the local community, it effectively denies the systematically interconnected nature of today’s world. Problems such as global exploitation, planetary climate change, rising surplus populations, and the repeated crises of capitalism are abstract in appearance, complex in structure, and non-localised. Though they touch upon every locality, they are never manifest in any particular region. Fundamentally, these are systemic and abstract problems, requiring systemic and abstract responses.” (p40) But the point is that the very recognition of the local aspects of the limitations of capitalism could become the basis to develop an understanding of the necessity to develop a generalised and international response in terms of the advance of the realisation of an alternative of global capitalism. People are generally motivated by what occurs in local terms and this emphasis need not undermine the development of a universal and international perspective of the necessity to establish the progress of an international socialist system. Hence there is nothing inherently reactionary or problematical about the recognition of the aspect of regional and national aspects concerning the issue of attempting to express the aims of socialism. Instead, this emphasis could also become the basis to realise that national objectives have to be expressed in international terms if the aim of socialism is to be effectively realised. But this type of potential does not seem to be recognised by the authors who instead consider that folk politics is ultimately flawed and problematical: “In the end, a significant part of the problem of folk politics lies less in the particular tactics and practices it tends to adhere to than in the overreaching strategic vision into which it is placed. Protests, marches, occupations, sit-ins and blockades all have their place: none of these tactics in themselves are fundamentally folk-political. But when they are marshalled by a strategic vision that seems temporary and small scale changes as the horizon of success, or when they are extrapolated beyond the particular conditions that made them effective, they are inevitably bound up with folk-political thinking.”(p49) But surely the issue is the development of a credible strategic perspective that would be able to connect the role of local struggles with the development of more national type mass movements that are able to generate the possibility of more radical change. In this context the actual success of local struggles could result in the promoting of more ambitious objectives of trying to achieve national and international forms of change. In other words, the aspect of the local is not a general pretext for the denial of more ambitious types of perspectives for transforming society but is instead the basis to encourage support for these very perspectives. This point can also be made about specific forms of struggle. It is the very creation of mass movements in local terms that can create the potential for the development of more ambitious types of political activity. But it is this very potential that seems to be denied by the authors in terms of a vague emphasis on the only credible form of political opposition which is either to be of a national or international form. But it could be specific issues in given areas that could also generate a more ambitious process of social change. The point is that it is the influence of Marxists which can enable these types of development to occur. Indeed, it is the task of Marxists to try and transform local struggles into becoming more ambitious forms of opposition to the domination of the capitalist system. But this possibility is not undermined by the importance of the role of folk politics. Instead, folk politics would seem to be a necessary aspect of the development of forms of radical opposition to the domination of the capitalist system. In other words, the transformation of popular discontent with aspects of the social formation requires the connection of the importance of folk politics with the role of a credible strategy of progressive change. It would be a sectarian error to deny the significance of folk politics in this context.

The authors make the valid point that it is necessary for progressive politics to outline conceptions of an alternative type of society: “Various modernities are possible, and new visions of the future are essential for the left. Such images are a necessary supplement to any transformative political project. They give a direction to political struggles and generate a set of criteria to adjudicate which struggles to support, which movements to resist, what to invent, and so on. In the absence of images of progress, there can be only reactive defensive battles, local resistance and a bunker mentality – what we have characterised as folk politics. Visions of the future are therefore indispensable for elaborating a movement against capitalism.” (p75) But the point is that the influence of this type of approach requires the influence of the role of Marxist parties that are able to develop important conceptions of alternatives to capitalism. However, the problem has been that the various Marxist groups have tended to emphasise the importance of the role of struggle at the expense of developing a conception of what would constitute a credible understanding of an alternative to capitalism. But the authors outline useful criteria of what represents the character of a post-capitalist society in terms of the ability of society to act in a collective and cooperative manner in order to provide the material goods that are required in order to realise the prosperity of the people. In other words, the aim would be to achieve the development of struggle in order to achieve a credible aim of the post-capitalist society. Hence the problem has been that whilst mass opposition to capitalism has often developed this aspect has been characterised by defensive ideologies that have been unable to articulate a credible conception of an alternative to capitalism. Thus people know what they are against, but are less certain about what they support as a possible replacement of the role of the capitalist mode of production. But is the reason for this development the role of folk politics as the authors suggest? “We so far argued that the contemporary left tends towards a folk politics that is incapable of turning the tide against global capitalism. In its place, the left needs to reclaim the contested legacy of modernity and advance visions of a new future.” (p85) But surely the very role of folk politics provides the impetus to generate increasing support for an alternative to capitalism that is based on the dynamism of the role of mass struggle. In other words the very perspective of a different type of society would be difficult to envisage it could not be connected to the very logic of the role of the various mass struggles that develop against aspects of capitalism. It could be suggested that the very logic of the movements of protest that occur are an expression of the ultimate objective of the necessity to create an alternative to the continued domination of capitalism. Hence forms of protest have the ultimate potential to represent the feasible possibility of the development of a new type of economy which is based on different principles when compared to the logic of capitalism. The aims of this type of movement are not the vague aspiration for post-work economy but is instead about liberating the process of productive activity from the domination of the present economic system. Hence the ultimate objective is about the establishment of a situation in which the producers can establish the conditions of the character of the role of work and productive activity. In other words, the problem is not primarily about the aspect of work within a capitalist economy but is instead related to the aspect of the domination of capital over the role of labour for the purpose of the extraction of surplus value. Therefore, the aim should be not to establish the unrealistic objective of a post-work economy but instead to realise the ability of labour to be able to define the aims and purpose of the aspect of productive activity. What is the primary objective is not the illusory objective of a post-work economy but is instead about establishing the ability of the role of the producers to be able to define the objectives of the continued importance of the process of work. The central issue concerns ending the realisation of the ability of labour to be able to define the objectives of economic activity in a non-exploitative manner. Only in this context can it be established that the character of the economy is being defined by the role of the producers. In contrast the conception of a post-work society is a vague aim that would not result in the liberation of the workers, and instead is an unrealistic aim that cannot be realised. Production has to occur in all types of societies. But the issue concerns what will be the character of the economic relations that express this aspect.

Indeed, the authors do not actually envisage the end of the role of work but instead the post-work economy will be based on the increased importance of the role of technology which means that the character of work will become more automated. They also advocate the shortening of the working week, and the introduction of a universal basic income in order to tackle issues of poverty and inequality. Primarily the universal basic income would mean the end of the dependency of labour on the role of capital in order to obtain subsistence: “A basic income changes this condition by giving the proletariat a means of subsistence without dependency on a job. Workers in other words would have the option to choose whether or not to take a job or not. A UBI therefore unbinds the coercive aspects of wage labour, partially de-commodifies labour, and thus transforms the political relationship between capital and labour.” (p120) But how is this prospect to be realised without the important role of the struggles of the workers in order to try and achieve this situation. The problem is that instead of this aim of a post-work economy being realised the situation is defined in different conditions in terms of the actual intensification of the exploitation of labour by capital. There has been an effective offensive of capital against labour which has changed the balance of forces in favour of the interests of the former and in opposition to the objectives of the workers. Hence only the development of an effective perspective of change would facilitate the possibility to realise the balance of class forces in favour of the interests of labour and so enable the realisation of a post-work economy. This situation would actually mean the expression of the possibility to develop a type of economy based on the aspirations of the workers rather than represent the interests of capital. But instead of this situation the forces of capital are able to utilise the demand of people for jobs in order to express the imposition of the objectives of the aims of capitalism. Hence the authors outline the advantages of a situation in which the workers are able to control the conditions of work but do not outline how this development can be realised. Hence, they comment: “If every worker were employed, the threat of being fired would lose its political power. The same dynamic holds for a basic income: by eliminating reliance on wage labour, workers gain control over how much labour to supply, giving them significant power in the labour market.” (p120) But the problematical issue is how this situation is to be realised. The point is that this aim is outlined without any credible explanation as to how it can be established in terms of the possible successful activity of the workers. In other words, the issue is not about the aim of a universal basic income which would transform the relations between the workers and employers, but instead concerns how to achieve a situation in which this objective can be realised in terms of a significant transformation of the balance of forces between capital and labour.

However, despite these problems the advantages of the role of the universal basic income are outlined convincingly by the authors: “While a universal basic income may appear economically reformist, its political implications are therefore significant. It transforms precarity, it recognises social labour, it makes class power easier to mobilise and it extends the space in which to experiment with how we organise communities and families. It is a redistribution mechanism that transforms production relations. It is an economic mechanism that changes the politics of work. And in terms of the class struggle, there is little to distinguish full employment from full unemployment: both tighten the labour market, give power to labour, and make it more difficult to exploit workers. Full unemployment has the added advantages…. Of not keeping workers chained to the wage relation, and of allowing workers autonomy over their lives.” (p123) But such an important change in the balance of class forces in favour of the interests of labour would require the development of a credible strategy that would enable this objective to be realised. But this is the very aspect that does not seem to be tackled by the authors. Instead, it is assumed in dogmatic terms that the perspective of change to a post-work economy can be realised: “The demand for full automation amplifies the possibility of reducing the working week and heightens the need for a universal basic income. A reduction in the working week helps produce a sustainable economy and leverage class power. And a universal basic income amplifies the potential to reduce the working week and expand class power. It would also accelerate the project of full automation: as worker power rose and as labour market tightened, the marginal cost of labour would increase as companies turned towards machinery in order to expand……And a new post-work hegemony would be resistant to reversion, having created a mass consistency benefiting from its continuation.”(p127) But the point is that as the authors are also aware the forces of capital have achieved a successful undermining of the influence of labour within the economy and society, and as a result have been able to achieve a situation of consolidated domination. They outline the situation of an adverse balance of class forces that seems to deny the possibility to realise the optimistic aspects of their perspective of change. Hence they also comment in contradictory terms that: “To achieve a meaningful post-work society therefore requires changing the present political conditions. In turn, this requires the left to face squarely up to the dismal situation before it: trade unions lying in ruin, political parties rendered into neoliberal puppets, and a waning intellectual and cultural hegemony. State and corporate repression of the left has significantly intensified in recent years, legal changes have made it difficult to organise, generalised precarity has made us more insecure….And beyond this lies the fact that our inner lives, our social world and our built environment are organised around work and its continuation.”(p129-130) Hence the justification of a perspective of change does not seem to be convincing given the apparent importance of the influence of the aspects which ensure the continued domination of the present capitalist system. Indeed, it is suggested that the various social democratic and communist strategies of transforming the present system into an alternative are no longer convincing. But in vague terms it is argued that a convincing counter-hegemonic strategy of change can be based on the following principles: “This is a strategy that is adaptable from positions of weakness, is scalable from the local to the global, and recognises the hold that capitalism has over every aspect of our lives…. A counter-hegemonic strategy entails a project to overturn the dominant neo-liberal common sense and rejuvenate the collective imagination. Fundamentally, it is an attempt to install a new common sense – one organised around the crisis of work and its effects on the proletariat. In this it involves preparatory work for moments when full scale struggle erupts, transforming our social imagination and reconfiguring our sense of what is possible. It builds up support and a common language for a new world, seeking to alter the balance of power in preparation for when a crisis upsets the legitimacy of society. Unlike forms of folk politics, such a strategy is expansive, long-term, comfortable with abstraction and complexity, and aiming at overthrowing capitalist universalism.” (p131-132) But the problem with this perspective is that it considers this programme of change in a manner that does not seem to be connected to the actual importance of the folk politics of the role of most mass struggles. In other words what is being suggested is an ideal approach that seems to have little relation to the actual character of the process of forms of mass opposition that develop within capitalist society. The point is that most forms of discontent within capitalism have a local and specific expression that is not directly connected to the objective of trying to transform the character of the social formation. Hence the role of Marxists and socialists is to try and establish the importance of the aim of a post-capitalist society as the basis for the development of the various forms of popular discontent and activity. In this connection the aim will be to try and develop a connection between folk politics and the objective of aspiring to transform the character of society in a socialist manner. But the authors contrast what they consider to be the credible possibility of post-capitalist aims with a rejection of the role of folk politics: “A counter-hegemonic project will therefore seek to overturn the existing set of alliances, common sense and rule by consent in order to install a new hegemony. Such a project will seek to build the social conditions from which a new post-work world can emerge and will require an expansive approach that goes beyond the temporary and local measures of folk politics. It requires mobilisation across different social groups which means linking together a diversity of individual interests into a common sense desire for a post-work society.” (p133) But the point is that if most struggles develop from a starting point of the role of folk politics then this will become the basis for the development of higher forms of collective activity that are increasingly national and international. It is true that it could become problematical if struggles do not go beyond the limits of folk politics, but it can also be suggested that this problem is not an inherent aspect of folk politics and instead what is of greater importance is the issue of the ideology that influences the type of perspectives that are adopted by the various mass struggles. In other words, folk politics can acquire reactionary influences, but it can also become progressive and be an expression of an aspiration for genuine socialism. It is the very task of Marxists to try and influence the folk political organisations to acquire genuine socialist type objectives. But if this development does not occur then it could become possible that folk politics acquires reactionary aims.

However, the authors do make the important point that a crucial aspect of the trajectory of movements of protest is that they support utopian conceptions of an alterative to the continued domination of capitalism: “We believe that an ambitious left is essential to a post-work programme, and that to achieve this, the future must be remembered and rebuilt. Utopias are the embodiment of……progress. They demand that the future be realised, they form an impossible but necessary object of desire, and they give us a language of hope and aspiration for a better world. The denunciations of utopia’s fantasies overlook the fact that it is precisely the element of imagination that makes utopia’s essential to any process of political change. If we want to escape from the present, we must first dismiss the settled parameters of the future and wrench open a new horizon of possibility. Without the belief in a different future, radical political thinking will be excluded from the beginning.” (p138-139) But the point is that what makes the ideology of utopianism important is that it is possible to describe various types of progressive society that are able to be defined in a manner that rejects the importance of the role of the capital and labour relation. In other words, the character of the utopian is connected to the effective description of a socialist alternative to the present economic system and so is able to outline the reasons why labour can replace the role of capital in terms of what should be dominant. In this manner the conception of utopia is an implicit rejection of the exploitative limitations of the capitalist system and instead outlines a possible emancipatory alternative. Hence the aspect of utopianism is ultimately important because it is based on providing a justification of what could be an alternative to the domination of capital.

But it is argued by the authors that the approach of utopianism is opposed to the role of folk politics: “This hegemonic strategy is therefore necessary to any project to transform society and the economy. And in many senses, hegemonic politics is the antitheses to folk politics. It seeks to persuade and influence, rather than presuming spontaneous politicisation; it works on multiple scales rather than just the tangible and local; it sets out to achieve forms of social power that are long lasting, rather than temporary ….A counter-hegemonic strategy would include efforts to transform the common sense of society, revive a utopian imagination, rethink the possibilities of economics, and eventually repurpose technological and economic infrastrucures.”(p153) But how can this development occur without being related to some connection to the importance of the local and the aspect of folk politics? The point is that folk politics is not inherently limited or reactionary but that it can instead become the basis to develop into something more important and effective in terms of national and international politics. In other words there is a potential for a collection of small movements to become connected in larger units and so in that manner acquire a greater collective potential that can enhance the possibility of genuine radical change being realised. What is important is the programme and perspectives of the various forms of the folk political organisations. It is entirely possible that the folk political groups can become the basis of national and international forms of international activity that are able to generate the possibility for change. What is of primary importance is the issue of the character of the perspectives that influence the folk groups. In this manner there is a possibility that the influence of forms of populism can be replaced by a more progressive and internationalist conception of the aim of socialism.

The authors contend that the character of contemporary capitalism means that the industrial working class is no longer a credible agency of social change. But they also contend that the various protest movements have not been able to replace the workers as an expression of a contemporary subject of progressive change. But the perspective they adopt is a vague commitment to a new type of society in which the domination of capital has been ended. They comment that: “A post-work world will not emerge out of the benevolence of the capitalists, the inevitable tendencies of the economy or the necessity of the crisis…. the power of the left… needs to be rebuilt before a post-work society can become a meaningful strategic option. This will involve a broad counter-hegemonic project that seeks to overturn neoliberal common sense and to rearticulate new understandings of ‘modernisation’, ‘work’ and ‘freedom’. This will necessarily be a populist project that mobilises a broad swathe of society and that whilst being anchored in class interests remains irreducible to them.” (p174) But this vague conception of a post-capitalist society seems to lack the precision and principles of the aim of socialism. In an ambiguous manner there is the commitment to the view that this society will be organised by the dynamic role of the workers, but the actual precise elaboration of how the domination of capital will be replaced by different relations of production is not outlined in precise terms. Instead of socialism we have the conception of the aim of a post-work society, but this is not outlined in terms of the primary and important role of labour for being able to organise a different type of economic system. Instead in a vague manner the conception of the aim of a post-work society is defined in the following ambiguous terms: “Humanity has for too long been shaped by capitalist impulses, and a post-work world portends a future in which these constraints have been significantly loosened. This does not mean that a post-work world would simply be a realm of play. Rather in such a society, the labour that remains will no longer be imposed by an external force by an employer or by the imperatives of survival. Work will become driven by our own desires, instead of by demands from the outside. Against the austerity of conservative forces…the demand for a post-work world revels in the liberation of desire, abundance and freedom.” (p176-177) It is accepted that such a perspective may have an uncertain character and that the aims of liberation may not be realised. Hence the authors do not express any definite confidence that the attempt to achieve an emancipated type of society and economy will be consistently realised. Instead, it may be difficult to overcome the realisation of tendencies towards the restoration of a situation of domination and the re-development of class differences. It is concluded that: “The hard task ahead is to build new worlds whilst acknowledging that they will create novel problems. The best utopias are always riven by discord.” (p179) Ultimately the confidence that a better type of society can be created is expressed by a vague assumption of a technological determinism, in which the ability of the people to organise the economy can result in the development of the productive forces in a manner that benefits the aims of humanity. But this ambiguous perspective is not connected to a credible conception of what constitutes a strategy to achieve the aim of the post-work world. Indeed, the issue of the importance of the subordination of labour within the relations of the capitalist mode of production and the connected role of the ideological supremacy of the defenders of the present system is not tackled in a convincing manner. Instead, they contend in a dogmatic manner that the realisation of a hegemonic ideology favouring revolutionary type change can be realised: “It is in this sense that hegemonic politics involves ‘leadership’ – not in the sense of changing the conditions which determine the trajectory of societies, by transforming the means by which subjectivities and desires are articulated and formed. This is politics, pure and simple.” (p198) But this perspective can only be justified in terms of the effective denial of analysing the complexity of the problems involved in developing a politics of struggle for change. It is this task which the rest of this article attempts to address.

The necessary starting point for any evaluation of the challenges involved in attempting to realise the success of revolutionary politics has to begin with the important problem of the small size of the various Marxist groups. These organisations do not seem able to become the basis of a popular expression of the role of class struggle and the connected attempt to realise a socialist alternative. This is the very issue that does not seem to be tackled by Srnicek and Williams. Instead, they assume in a vague manner that people will somehow inevitably become supporters of the aim of a post-work society and the connected objective of ending the domination of capital. But in actuality the small size of the Marxist groups contributes to a view that the era of Marxism is over and that the very objective of alternatives to capitalism has become unrealistic. In this context it would seem that the defenders of capitalism have an uncontested ideological hegemony and even the notion of militant trade union struggle seems to be discredited. Therefore, it would seem that the most important task of Marxists is to develop a perspective that could encourage the renewal of the role of the class struggle. If this type of perspective was to achieve popular support such a development could mean the re-emergence of the role of militant forms of mass action. However, this possibility has to be connected to a convincing ideological struggle to obtain the support of workers that militant mass activity can be an effective form of the defence of their class interests. Hence it is necessary to try and ideologically challenge the view that the domination of capital has become an invincible and unchallengeable aspect of society. Hence there is a problem the very success of capital in ensuring the domination of the present economic system seems to have undermined the credibility of the view that the workers can challenge this situation as a result of the role of collective action. Therefore, in this apparently unfavourable economic and political condition the domination of capital seems to be an inevitability and the very conception of a politics of resistance to this situation seems to have become unrealistic. Hence there would seem to be no alternative than to attempt to build a credible Marxist party which could advocate a programme of class struggle in a more convincing manner when compared to the attempt to promote this type of perspective in the recent period. The authors vaguely suggest that the forces of the left wing have to win the struggle for ideological hegemony if change is to occur. But the problem is that the forces of the establishment seem to have an uncontested ideological domination which means the aims of socialism can be considered to be discredited. How can this unfavourable situation be changed? The problem with the approach of the authors is that this challenge is not credibly addressed and instead it is vaguely assumed that at some favourable moment in time the forces of Marxism will realise the increasing influence of the post-capitalist perspective. But such an assumption does not adequately tackle the challenges connected to the situation of the supremacy of the forces of capital. It has to be suggested that this unfavourable development is connected to the limitations of the Marxist groups who are unable to articulate an alternative to capitalism in convincing terms. Instead of assuming that change will be inevitable in a vague manner it is necessary that the various Marxist parties try to elaborate a perspective for the transformation of society that is based on an awareness of the problems involved in trying to realise the process of social change. This increased sense of realism would actually make these groups more credible and so in that manner they could develop increasing popular support. Furthermore, the various organisations would have to unite on the basis of support for a programme of change. This very unity would represent the understanding that a generally agreed perspective would seem to be more credible than the advocacy of different programmes by competing organisations.

However, we have still not addressed the specific issue of what could constitute a credible programme of revolutionary change. It is necessary that the basis of a convincing programme has to begin with an attempt to understand the present balance of class forces in a manner that is accurate rather than expressing the imposition of aspirations onto the conception of actual social reality.

But another book that is also concerned with the issues of the attempt to realise a more emancipatory society suggests that there is something problematical about the attempt to realise a different form of political power: “The idea of changing society through the conquest of power thus ends up achieving the opposite of what it sets out to achieve. Instead of the conquest of power being a step towards the abolition of power relations, the attempt to conquest power involves the extension of the field of power relations into the struggle against power. What starts as a scream against the protest against power, against the dehumanisation of people, against the treatment of humans as means rather than ends, becomes converted into its opposite, into the assumption of the logic, habits and discourse of power into the very heart of the struggle against power.”(John Holloway: Change the world without taking power: Pluto Press, London 2002) But this outcome cannot be considered as an inevitable result of a revolutionary process but instead depends on the expression of the character of the ideology of the socialist party and the result of the relations that it establishes with the people in terms of the development of the political system. Holloway contends that the revolutionary tradition is based on the justification of omnipotent power of an elite, but it was in fact unfavourable circumstances and a situation of political polarisation that led to the increasing authoritarianism of the Bolshevik government in Russia. The actual aim was to develop the role of Soviet democracy which could have meant the expression of the accountability of the government to the people, but this potential was not realised because of the polarisation of the civil war. In other words, the Bolsheviks considered that the revolutionary government would attempt to establish a situation of genuine popular democracy that would express a situation of accountability of the administration to the people, but this development was not possible because of the situation of the problem of counterrevolution and the polarisation within society. The progressive aims of the Bolsheviks could not be realised because of adverse circumstances. However, the alternative of Holloway to this problem of authoritarianism is to suggest the necessity of changing the world without taking power. But how can capitalism be transformed if the working class does not establish its political supremacy within society? He indicates the importance of the example of the role of the Zapatista movement in Mexico, but what this development represents is the creation of limited areas of autonomy in which the Zapatista forces are able to influence the character of economic and political developments. But such a situation does not represent a genuine transformation of the character of society in a progressive manner. Instead, all that has resulted is the modification of aspects of the domination of the ruling class in terms of the expression of the limited influence of the role of the popular movement of the people. Ultimately this situation cannot become stable and instead what has to result is the development of the struggle of the people in order to realise the objective of power. However, the Zapatista’s have rejected this perspective in terms of an acceptance of the continuing domination of the present social system. It is not recognised that the actual basis to consolidate the character of the type of society that are trying to construct requires the definite progress of their activity so that it is able to become dominant.

But Holloway justifies the approach of the Zapatista’s in terms of the conception of anti-power. He comments that: “The struggle to liberate power-to is not the struggle to construct a counter-power, but rather an anti-power, something that is radically different from power-over. Concepts of revolution that focus on the taking of power are typically centred on the notion of counter-power. The strategy is to construct a counter-power, a power that can stand up against the ruling power. Often the revolutionary movement has been constructed as a mirror image of power, army against army, party against party, with the result that power reproduces itself within the revolution itself. Anti-power, then, is not counter-power, but something much more radical: it is the dissolution of power-over, the emancipation of power-too.” (p36) But how is this development possible without the attempt to realise the ascendency of the alternative centres of the expression of what is actually a rival centre of power. The point is that there is only the possibility of a situation of the domination of a form of established power, or the successful development of an alternative centre of power that is able to unite progressive aims with a strategy to undermine the continued domination of the established system. Indeed, the problem has been that movements of opposition have often been unable to develop effective strategies of opposition to the present economic system and instead have had to accommodate to the continued domination of the social formation. Hence the problem is not that of power, but instead the inability to develop credible forms of counter-power. Indeed the struggle of power-to with what is defined as anti-power is described by Holloway but this is ultimately based on the denial of the logic of this development which is to aspire to establish a new system of power. Instead he comments: “Anti-power is fundamentally opposed to power-over not only in the sense of being a radically different project, but also in the fact that it is in constant conflict with power-over. The attempt to exercise power-to in a way that does not entail the exercise of power over others, inevitably comes into conflict with power-over.” (p37) But such a contradiction that results in struggle between two rival forces can only be characterised as having the logic of contesting the aspect of power. The success of the anti-power forces can only be established in terms of the realisation of a new centre of power. What is actually important is that this development does not result in the realisation of a new type of authoritarian social system. The argument of Holloway is that the expression of power can only be elitist, but the point is that the realisation of a new type of power that is based on the aim of being a system accountable to the people would suggest that a different situation can be created in which the principles of a democratic system are being consistently realised. In other words, the issue of importance is what is the character of the role of power. Is this expression in the interests of an elite, or can it be suggested that it is possible to connect power to the objective of the genuine emancipation of society? Is power connected to the interests of achieving a classless type of system? The problem for Holloway’s stance is that if he rejects the aspect of power as being inherently authoritarian this means that he implies that the very attempt to establish a new type of social system can be problematical and which can only result in the consolidation of an elite that has been able to establish a new type of power relations. But we would suggest that the aspect of power can be connected to progressive objectives such as the attempt to create a society that has as its major aim the realisation of the aims of social and economic emancipation. Hence the important point is what is the character of the role of power. It is based on upholding relations of domination or is it instead connected to attempting to realise a situation of the emancipation of society and in this manner expressing the possibility to establish a classless society? The problem is that Holloway’s conception of power is that it has absolutely negative implications and so cannot be connected to the expression of progressive aims. But it could be argued that the genuine power of the people is able to make advances towards the creation of a classless society in which the very aspect of power does become transformed into a situation of decreasing importance. But such a development is only possible if the people are initially able to establish their economic and political power in order to make advances towards the realisation of this possibility. In contrast Holloway advocates a vague conception of anti-power which seems to deny the necessity for the workers to establish a situation of power if they are to be able to credibly be able to transform society in an effective manner. Hence his approach becomes a politics of protest that is unable to justify an effective strategy of genuine economic and political change. But we would suggest that the actual realisation of the power of the people can be a liberating and progressive development that is able to establish the possibility for the development of forms of democracy and accountability of a progressive government. In this context the alternative of anti-power seems to be a vague perspective that is unable to express the actual possibility to realise the aim of the transformation of capitalism into a more progressive type of social system.

But the views of Holloway are connected to what he considers to be the problematical conception of the perspective of working-class emancipation. He considers that this aim is contradictory and flawed because: “We do not struggle as working class, we struggle against being working class, against being classified. Our struggle is not the struggle of labour: it is the struggle against labour. It is the unity of the process of classification (the unity of capital accumulation) that gives unity to our struggle, not our unity as members of a common class. Thus, for example, it is the significance of the Zapatista struggle against capitalist classification that gives it importance for class struggle, not the question of whether the indigenous inhabitants of the Lacandon jungle are or are not members of the working class. There is nothing good about being members of the working class, about being ordered, commanded, separated from our product and our process of production. Struggle arises not from the fact that we are working class but from the fact that we-are-and-are-not working class, that they we exist against-and-beyond being working class, that they try to order and command us but we do not want to be ordered and commanded, that they try to separate us from our product and our producing and our humanity and our selves and we do not want to be separated from all that. In this sense, working class identity is not something ‘good’ to be treasured, but something ‘bad’, something to be fought against, something that is fought against, something that is constantly at issue. Or rather, working class identity should be seen as a non-identity; the communion of struggle to be not working class.” (p144) But the problem with this viewpoint is that it fails to recognise the importance of the aspect of the class consciousness of the workers if collective action is to occur against the limitations of capitalism. It is the collective acceptance of the interests of the working class which motivates the possibility of popular struggle to reject the imposition of the domination of capital over labour. Holloway s right t suggest that the workers reject the conception of a view that their role should merely be to accept the imposition of the imperatives of capital, but this development does not mean the rejection of the importance of the aspect of class and is instead about connecting the character of the workers to opposing the imposition of the domination of capital within the relations of production. For example, the formation of trade unions expresses the intention of the workers to collectively organise in order to defend their interests, even if this development is not explicitly connected to the aim of ending the domination of capital within the economy. Hence the very understanding of the importance of being working class indicates a possible opposition to the imposition of the imperatives of capital within the relations of production. But Holloway rejects this conclusion and instead considers that the very definition of being working class implies an acceptance of the domination of capital: “We take part in class struggle on both sides. We classify ourselves in so-far as we produce capital, insofar as we respect money, insofar as we participate, through our practice, our theory, our language (our defining the working class), in the separation of subject and object. We simultaneously struggle against our classification in so far as we are human. We exist against-in-and-beyond capital, and against-in-and-beyond ourselves. Humanity, as it exists, is schizoid, volcanic: everyone is torn apart by the class antaongism.” (p144) But surely the issue of class characterisation is not in dispute in relation to the development of the struggles of the workers within capitalism. Instead, what is being aspired to is initially improvements in the economic and social conditions of the workers, and this aspiration may become the basis of the development of support for the objective of emancipation and the ending of the domination of capital. What is being suggested is that the classification as workers should not justify a situation of exploitation within the relations of production and instead there should be the development of the improvement of economic and social conditions. This type of questioning of capitalism may result in increasingly radical aspirations which result in opposition to the prevailing economic system.

However, this approach is rejected by Holloway who instead contends that: “It is only in so far as we are/ are not the working class that revolution as the self-emancipation of the working class becomes conceivable. The working class cannot emancipate itself in so far as it is the working class. It is only in so far as we are not the working class that the question of emancipation can even be posed. And yet, it is only as far as we are working class (subjects torn from their objects) that the need for emancipation arises…. we, the critical subject are and are not the working class.” (p145) But the point is that it is an increasingly collective consciousness of being workers in a situation of subordination to the interests of capital which results in increasing discontent and the possibility of the generation of collective activity in order to try and change this situation. In contrast, if people consider themselves in individual terms with their own particular interests this development of collective class activity is not likely to occur, and so the domination of capital is not challenged. The point is that if people consider themselves to be workers, they are also likely to become aware of the importance of the domination of capital within the economy. In this context they can aspire to change this situation by collective activity. Therefore, the result of these developments is that people can become supporters of the aim of the liberation of the workers. In other words, they are aware that the economic situation of the working class is unsatisfactory and so they aspire to change this situation. The initial result of awareness is the development of trade unions, but ultimately socialist political parties become formed. However, this mass discontent does not necessarily result in social change because the workers are often defeated in the process of class struggle. But such developments do not mean that people have become reconciled with the domination of capital, instead what has occurred is the success of capital in the class struggle. But Holloway considers that progressive change will only occur when the workers reject this very classification of their character: “The working class does not stand outside capital: on the contrary it is capital that defines it (us) as working class. Labour stands opposed to capital, but it is an internal opposition. It is only as far as labour is something more than labour, the worker more than a seller of labour power, that the issue of revolution can even be posed. The concept of fetishism implies inevitably that we are self-divided, that we are divided against ourselves.” (p145-146) But it is not the classification by people as being working class that is responsible for this situation of self-estrangement, rather it is the character of capitalism as being based on the subordination of labour within the relations of production that has led to this conception of the equation of workers as being an expression of a situation of domination and inequality. Therefore, the aim is to develop the collective action of the working class in order to achieve a possible situation of social emancipation. In this context the very pride of being working class can contribute to the generation of collective struggle that can result in the very possibility of the emancipation of labour from the domination of capital. Thus, class consciousness can only have a constructive relationship to the possibility to generate struggle in order to try and realise a socialist alternative. The point is that being aware of a working-class character can facilitate the development of struggle in order to realise an alternative to capitalism. But this is the very aspect that Holloway seems to consider is not conducive to the generation of the role of collective struggle against capitalism. The point is that this conception of being working class is connected to an understanding of being opposed to the domination of capital and so in favour of collective struggle in order to transform this situation. Therefore, the very definition of the working class is considered in revolutionary terms, and so does not in any manner imply or justify the domination of capital within the economy. The point is that the conception of the working class is influenced by the role of ideology. In Marxist terms what is being indicated is the perspective of a possible revolutionary agency of change. But to Holloway the definition of the working class implies the acceptance of the hegemony of capital and so should be rejected as being problematical. But we would suggest that the approach of Marx is more consistent and credible and so should be supported against the attempt at modification in the approach of Holloway.

However, in an inconsistent manner Holloway considers that Marx establishes the possibility for the revolutionary transformation of capitalism because of the importance of a situation in which: “Capital is dependent on labour in a way in which labour is not dependent upon capital. Capital without labour ceases to exist: labour, without capital becomes practical creativity, creative practice, humanity.” (p182) But the apparent truth of this comment actually ignores the fact that the relations of production of capitalism express an unequal character of economic power in which it seems that labour is dependent on the role of capital. This situation seems to be apparent as long as the capitalist system continues to function. Only the successful development of class struggle indicates the increasing ability of the workers to be able to define the character of the economy in an independent manner and without the acceptance of a relationship to the role of capital. But without this development the workers generally accept the importance of capital for being necessary in order to generate the basis of economic activity. Hence the influence of Marxism is essential if workers are to develop an understanding that they can represent the primary role in the development of the process of production. But without this aspect the workers generally assume that capitalism is needed in order to create an efficient and functioning economy. Holloway upholds his perspective by indicating that capital is dependent on the role of labour for the development of production, but the very influence of ideology of capitalism means that the importance of the workers becomes obscured. Instead, the importance of ideology implies that production cannot occur without the workers accepting the economic imperatives imposed by the domination of capital. The influence of this standpoint undermines the development of class struggle based on the rejection of the role of capital by the workers. But Holloway seems to ignore this point and instead dogmatically contends that the very aspect of struggle will generate the possibility of revolutionary change: “Struggles are rarely mere struggles against. The experience of shared struggle always involves the development of relations between people that are different in quality from the social relations of capitalism. There is much evidence that for people involved in strikes or similar struggles, the most important outcome of the struggles in often not the realisation of the immediate demands, but the development of a community of struggle, a collective doing characterised by its opposition to capitalist forms of social relations.”(p208) But the ultimate problem of this perspective is that it is a programme for rebellion but it is merely against capitalism and is unable to explain what we should be advocating and promoting in convincing terms: “How then do we change the world without taking power? At the end of the book, as at the beginning we do not know. The Leninists know, or used to know. We do not. Revolutionary change is more desperately urgent than ever, but we do not know any more what revolution means…. In part, our not knowing is the not knowing of those who are historically lost: the knowing of the revolutionaries of the last century has been defeated. But it is more than that: our not-knowing is also the not-knowing of those who understand that not-knowing is part of the revolutionary process. We have lost all certainty, but the openness of uncertainty is central to revolution.” (p215) However we would contend that instead of this acceptance of an indecisive approach concerning the role of a revolutionary organisation we would suggest that it is still the task of a Marxist party to try and outline the principles and aspects of a potentially credible programme of change. Our task is to convince the people that this perspective can be realised in terms of the intensification of increasingly conscious class struggle. The aim of this approach is to suggest that the workers can establish an alternative to capitalism because they are still the major basis for the functioning of the present economy. This means the working class has the potential to become the basis of a credible agency of change that is able to establish a different type of society. The realisation of a genuinely democratic society without the aspect of exploitation of the relations of production. However, the present marginalisation of Marxism means that the realisation of these tasks seems to be questionable. Therefore, the primary task is to establish the politics of a credible Marxism which can result in the possible development of an effective influence of a revolutionary standpoint. This means connecting the discontent of the workers with capitalism to the aim of the promotion of a socialist alternative. Hence there is no complexity about this task. It is necessary to outline a credible conception of socialism which can create the potential to realise popular support. The more convincing we can elaborate our understanding of a socialist alternative the more possible it will be to overcome the present insignificance of Marxism. We still need to connect a programme for the development of class struggle with a more detailed understanding of a possible socialist alternative t capitalism.