

# Book Review

**Getting Free: Creating an Association of Democratic Autonomous Neighborhoods**

by James Herrod

(Lucy Parsons Center, Boston, 2007 [www.lucyparsons.org](http://www.lucyparsons.org) – distributed by AK Press)

Roughly 5 years ago the idea of neighborhood assemblies was one of the things that inspired me to eventually quit my job and go to South America for a few months, trying to meet amazing revolutionary people like the ones who were engaged in taking back control of their own lives in Argentina by organizing non-hierarchical community groups; While I was in Buenos Aires I met a gringo freelance writer named Reed who lived there, and in his apartment I saw a book called *Change the World Without Seizing Power*, by John Holloway. I finally found my own copy of that book 2 years later and started reading it, and it ended up being the 2<sup>nd</sup> biggest written disappointment of 2006 for me.

Holloway's thin but dense tome, and the man himself, had attained quite a reputation, but when I finally, eagerly, sat down to peruse it, I was immediately struck by how cold the book was. A professor in Puebla, Mexico and an expert on the Zapatistas, I had imagined that his work would be an exhilarating call to arms that explained in an exciting way how the anti-capitalist, anti-globalization forces around the world are looking at power and social struggle in a brand new way.

Instead, "Change the World..." was a thicket of academese, a tangle of abstraction wrapped around a void of tepid theory. Despite Holloway's endless rhetoric about something he called "the scream," I felt like falling asleep every time I opened the book (and I hear from people who've seen him speak that his personality is a match to this limp verbiage). In despair and boredom I gave up a couple months and 100 pages in. Yes, I'm the same kid that bought and somehow read the entirety of a book called *The Philosophy of Time and Space* as a high school junior, that forced his way through Pynchon's *V* and took 2 laborious years to read *Ulysses* just because I thought I should. But now, I've lost patience for writing that isn't going to reward me on a somewhat regular basis. Life is too short and I'm getting too old. (Not to knock James Joyce or Pynchon!)

So it brings me great pleasure to discover James Herrod's *Getting Free*, a book of about the same length as Holloway's, but 100 times better. Having arrived in the mailbox at Dry River last week, apparently direct from the author, this is the book I wished *Change the World...* would have been, and it should be getting at least as much attention. *Getting Free* is

nothing less than a real, smart, credible, and practical guide to dismantling the current fucked-up society we are in now – and not only that, but replacing it with something else that **would** work.

Herrod is a product of the 60s, apparently a new-left anarchist radical that never gave up and sold out, and has a bit of a curmudgeonly, out-of-patience tone to his writing, but that's okay, because he's obviously been thinking about these things for a long time, and his book is something he's taken decades to finish in this form. The book is structured and argued in a very rational way; he starts with an explanation of terms, and then on to "How We Don't Want To Live," a brief but rousing list of what's wrong with our capitalist world, but he readily admits that he hasn't the time or space to convince the reader. He knows that he is aiming at an audience of readers that already hate capitalism. Those who still don't can look elsewhere for arguments.

Next he lists the basics of how we might want to live, and this is where he lays out the key 3-pronged strategy for his new social form: Households, Workplace "peer circles", and Neighborhood Assemblies. In brief, his peer circles are like the classic syndicalist worker councils, but he makes clear that if we *only* seize the means of production without also seizing control of our residential and personal lives, we can never win.

Herrod goes on to explain what the other anti-capitalist strategies in the past and present have been and why they've failed or are failing, covering everything from guerrilla warfare to demonstrations to general strikes.

The way he writes is refreshingly simple, down-to-earth, and direct. In fact, it's this very directness combined with his blunt, curmudgeonly sort of matter-of-fact tone that makes the book both entertaining and inspiring and very easy to read. To show you what I mean I'd like to excerpt a few nuggets of this blunt wisdom here for your enjoyment:

¶As a rule, demonstrations barely even embarrass capitalists, let alone frighten or damage them... they mostly just alert the ruling class that it needs to retool or invent new measures to counter an emerging source of opposition.

¶Nothing has derailed the anticapitalist struggle during the past quarter century so thoroughly as have these movements (based on gender, racial, sexual, or ethnic identities)... Identity politics has simply swamped class politics.

¶We cannot destroy capitalism by dropping out... the only escape from

capitalism is to destroy it... in fact, capitalists love it when we drop out. They don't need us. They have plenty of suckers already.

¶The thing is this: in order for capitalism to be destroyed, millions and millions of people must be dissatisfied with their way of life.... What must exist is a pressing desire to live a certain way and not to live another way. If this pressing desire were a desire to live free, to be autonomous, to live in democratically controlled communities, to participate in the self-regulating activities of a mature people, then capitalism could be destroyed. Otherwise, we are doomed to perpetual slavery and possibly even extinction.

The real meat of the book is Chapter 7, “Ways to Begin Gutting Capitalism.” Here Herrod lays out very simple activities and tactics that we all as radicals can do, basically *right now*, to begin to weaken and destabilize capitalist society and prepare to replace it with the new way of life he proposes. These ideas include **Form a Neighborhood Association, Build a Meeting Hall, Set up Local Currencies, and Will Your House to a Community Trust**, and even the complicated **Do Not Work Hard at Our Jobs**. One that rings especially true for me is **Organize Locally to Stop Ruling-Class Offensives in the Community** (and stop going to international protest demonstrations). Most of these are not new ideas to us radicals and activists, but the clear way that Herrod puts them in the context of the larger anti-capitalist struggle, and his frank language, makes them seem fresh and exciting all over again.

For instance:

¶**Don't Cooperate with the Police**

Except in urban ghettos, the police in the advanced capitalist states work in a friendly social environment. This is a shame.

Some less obvious tactics are: **Try Not to Fall into Debt, Break Free From Schooling, Don't Let the Church or State Certify Your Marriage**, and **Don't Recycle** (“Don't spend your life trying to clean up the mess capitalism is making of the earth. Spend your life destroying capitalism.”).

This is good stuff. Not that Herrod is claiming it will be easy. Most of

these tactics are about creating a culture of resistance, and starting social structures that will be in place when capitalist structures start to implode. He's in it for the long haul, and there will be trouble and fierce opposition from the ruling class, but he implores, “We have to stop fighting for what we can get, and start fighting for what we want.”

Seems like pretty smart stuff to me. Of course, none of this is rocket surgery, but Herrod fits it together into a coherent strategy that just makes sense.

The one slight drawback to the book is that the author apparently thought he'd use the opportunity of publishing a book to throw in various miscellaneous gripes of his at the end. For instance, it has always turned me off about anarchist writings in general that there is so much infighting and inter-school-of-thought attacks, attacks that often verge on the personal. A lot of what Herrod says in critique of various other groupings of anarchists (namely green anarchists, primitivists, “post-left” anarchists, and Crimethinc) is stuff that I agree with, but it just seems to be a little bit off-topic and unnecessary; and why potentially alienate readers by throwing mud at labels, when what you're doing is presenting some good ideas that are, as far as I'm concerned, independent of labels and schools of thought anyway? There's always the chance that some young Crimethinc fan will read this book and get inspired, but then when they see him cutting down Crimethinc, change their minds and go back to another slick issue of *Rolling Thunder* and another year of hopping freights and writing poetry, instead of actually getting started on the good work that Herrod describes....

Overall, though, “Getting Free” is excellent, probably the best and most realistic text on the subject of **exactly how** to build a better world (or start trying to), a world based on true freedom and equality and direct democracy.

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