

Krisis

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SAYING 'WE' AGAIN
A CONVERSATION WITH JODI DEAN ON DEMOCRACY,
OCCUPY AND COMMUNISM

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polar/Krisis: *You argue that democracy is so intimately tied up with what you call 'communicative capitalism' that every attempt from the left to re-appropriate the term, to give it a more radical meaning and to distinguish it from the electoral regimes of representative democracy has to fail. This seems difficult to accept for many people on the left.*

JD: There are a couple of reasons why I take this position. First, and most broadly, democracy is not a category of contestation anymore. Right and left agree on democracy and use a democratic rhetoric to justify their positions. George Bush claimed to be defending democracy all over the world by bombing all sorts of people. If that is democracy, then that is not a language that the left can use to formulate an egalitarian and emancipatory potential or hope. A second reason, which is a repercussion of the first one, is that democracy is a kind of ambient milieu, it's the air we breathe, everything is put in terms of democracy nowadays. And this relates to the third reason: the rhetoric of democracy is particularly strong

now in the way in which it is combined with the form of capitalism I call 'communicative capitalism', where ideals of inclusion and participation, of making one's voice heard and one's opinion known are also used by T-Mobile and Apple. Participation ends up being the answer to everything. If that's the case, referring to it is not making a cut with our dominant frame, it's just reinforcing it. If governments and corporations are encouraging one to participate then leftists don't add one thing that's not already present if they say that what we need is to make sure that everyone is participating and included – that's already what we have. For the left to be able to make a break we have to speak a language that is not already the one we're in.

polar/Krisis: *This sounds primarily like a strategic or political reason for shifting the focus away from democracy. But is there really something fundamentally wrong on a theoretical level with the more radical notion of democracy?*

JD: What's wrong with the notion of democracy as even radical democrats have appropriated it is that it leaves capitalism in place. The assumption is that if we have enough democracy the problem of capitalism will either go away or solve itself – and that's clearly false. Take Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe: their idea of radical democracy is framed specifically to keep class from being a primary political determination. In the Frankfurt School tradition Habermas's distinction between life-world and system leaves capitalism untouched. The same is true for the focus on civil society which leaves the mode of production out of the frame. So the theoretical reason for my skepticism is that the left has moved away from an analysis and critique of capitalism.

polar/Krisis: *You refer to democracy as a 'neoliberal fantasy' – could you explain that notion a bit?*

JD: The more neo-liberalism has entrenched itself the more we have been hearing this language of democracy, as if participation was going to solve all problems – but this is a fantasy because the fundamental truth is that it is not going to solve these problems. Keeping all the activity in the democratic sphere makes it seem as if people are busy, engaged etc. without

ever affecting the basic structure. It's a fantasy because it functions like a screen.

polar/Krisis: *Building on this diagnosis, you introduce an alternative vocabulary with the term 'communism' at its center – a difficult term, one could say, if only for strategic purposes given that it is widely regarded as historically discredited.*

JD: First, there has been the return of communism in the theoretical discussion that started with the conferences Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou have organized. Hardt and Negri have been talking about communism for a long time already. It's important to return to the language of communism because that is the one word that says 'no to capitalism'. No matter what, if people say that they are communist, you know that they are against private property and the private ownership of the means of production and for the people's control over these means. There's no nuance about their relation to capitalism, and that's what is important. A third reason is that the right in the US still believes in it, they are constantly attacking communism which means that they know that it is the language of anti-capitalism that appeals to some kind of emancipatory egalitarianism. So I don't think that communism is as dead as the left seems to assume. The right knows it's alive.

polar/Krisis: *This might of course be specific to the US and a bit different in Europe. But let's turn to a more theoretical concern. We agree that the analysis of capitalism, and more generally a Marxist perspective on class society, is absolutely crucial and that this has been neglected or marginalized in a lot of radical-democratic thought. But on the other hand it seems that the return to communism, e.g. in the work of Badiou, is also in a problematic way detached from a social-theoretical analysis of society. The effect is that communism is understood in activist or voluntarist terms, as if we could just decide to establish communism, whereas in the Marxist framework it was always tied to both a socio-theoretical analysis and to existing emancipatory movements. Does communism return as utopia instead of real movement?*

JD: I don't think this detachment is so characteristic of the return of communism. It's true that Badiou lacks any account of the economy, but David Harvey has a strong Marxist analysis of the economy that recognizes changes, such as the emergence of new places of struggle and organization such as the city. So here there is a socio-economic anchor and communism is not seen as free-floating. The same is true for Hardt and Negri, particularly in *Empire* their account, which goes back to the whole post-autonomia discussion and its analysis of the social factory, recognizes that there are socio-economic changes and movements that can still be analyzed with variations of Marxist categories and provide a location for some kind of communist movement. Another question is whether there is an active, vivid communist movement right now. That would probably be far-fetched with regard to the US and Germany or the Netherlands – but look at other parts of the world such as Nepal and India or Greece. We go too quickly if we say that there is no social analysis or link with any real movements.

polar/Krisis: *What about Occupy? Do you see a possible link with the return to communism or is it a democratic movement?*

JD: It's a plural and open movement with multiple tendencies.

polar/Krisis: *That sounds like communicative capitalism!*

JD: You're right, that's a problem, and one of the views I often argue against is that Occupy is a 'meme' that jumped from the internet onto the streets or that it's primarily driven by social media. I don't think this is true. What made the movement work in the US was the relation to Wall Street, it wasn't Occupy Capitol or Congress. That gives us the anti-capitalist core that is the substance of the movement even as all the other tendencies sometimes make us lose sight of that.

polar/Krisis: *Can you say something about the institutional or organizational structures that the movement against capitalism and for communism would have to have? You argue that we have to renew the idea of the party. Many will regard that with some skepticism!*

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JD: First on the idea of the party. Lukács is really great in his book *Lenin: A Study on the Unicity of his Thought* in recognizing that the party is a form for the actuality of revolution, which means that it is a form that we need because of the multiplicity of people who become mobilized when a movement starts. Of course, they are going to bring all kinds of different forms of consciousness to the movement and that can easily be redirected and become a kind of populism. So a party can be useful in trying to respond to this – not dogmatically but flexibly, trying to push and steer a little bit.

But it should not and cannot get ahead of the people. It has to have a much more responsive relationship to it, trying to direct in a responsive way. So with regard to the first question I think that a party is necessary and that we can recognize even in the old history of Communist parties it was never as dogmatic, unresponsive or rigid as the critics want us to think.

Second, not a whole lot of people are excited about the party idea; I'll admit to that. But I think the experience of Syriza can be made more inspiring for people outside of Greece. Because they see that there is a flexible left coalition that was able within four or five months to function as a party and make real progress. That would be different in the United States because we do not have a parliamentary system, so the incentives for the party form are not really there, which is a real problem. On the other hand, one of the experiences that has come out of 'Occupy' is that there needs to be a more explicit understanding of how leaders function and arise so that leaders can be accountable and different people can move in and out of leadership positions, in an open, transparent and accountable way. So I would hope that over the next year some more cohesive organizational form can emerge and I do not think that it hurts to call it a party.

polar/Krisis: *Historically the role that Communist parties have played has often turned out to be anti-revolutionary not only with respect to e.g. the more anarchist currents in these revolutionary movements but also in other ways. One might think that the council system would be a good alternative to the party form in terms of organizing the movement.*

JD: I don't think that the party form is opposed to councils, cells or soviets. In October I was reading Lenin's *April Theses* and thought that the general assemblies of Occupy are a new form of soviet. All of these are units in which a party can function or which can be components of a party. They are not opposed to each other. I think Anarchists are too reductive here because they treat the party as something on top rather than something within: an organization of voices within a broader field. I think it is a mistake to build up this dichotomy.

polar/Krisis: *But there do seem to be historical and sociological reasons to be skeptical.*

JD: There have been multiple kinds of parties. Even in the Soviet Union the party changed over time. It went from being a revolutionary party with multiple splits to one that became less tolerant of vocal opposition within it to one that was a ruling bureaucratic party to a bureaucratic party that would also purge itself and change over time. People act like freaks when it comes to Communism and install a narrowness and a determinism that would be anathema in any other intellectual discussion. I think it is really time to get out of that Cold War mentality that lets us reduce everything to one kind of bureaucratic Stalinist party as if that were the only thing that a Communist party ever was.

polar/Krisis: *Let us come back to the Occupy Movement once more. Maybe you could elaborate a little more on where you see the significance of the movement.*

JD: The most important thing about Occupy Wall Street is that it let the Left recognize itself as a Left again instead of speaking in terms of all these different identity categories splitting the Left and saying ad nauseum that there is no Left and that no one can say 'we'. With Occupy Wall Street we can finally say 'we' again. It really was a situation where the question was: 'are you for or against Occupy Wall Street?' And people from a wide variety of positions on the Left ended up having to say, 'Yes, we are for it'. Even if their acceptance was qualified or critical, that 'for or against' became a dividing line. Occupy is an event partly because of its ability to inscribe this kind of division so people have to say whether they are for or

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against it: ‘Are you one of us or not?’ – even if the ‘us’ is amorphous, changing and plural. But it was a really divisive moment in the very best possible way. So first, its significance lies in the way it galvanized the Left. Naomi Klein said at the end of the first week of the occupation: ‘This is the most exciting thing in the world right now’, meaning for us in the US Left to have something that was galvanizing and that was an opening. That is what I think of Occupy Wall Street as an evental form.

I also think it is a political organization of the incompatibility of capitalism and democracy. Its particular form ties it to the content of the gap between capitalism and democracy.

polar/Krisis: *One of the main criticisms regarding strategy that have been made is the absence of an agenda or a set of demands.*

JD: I was in the Demands Working Group, which died a really horrible death. It was about March and it was horrible to watch as it was painful and ongoing. The problem of demands was initially presented as if it wasn’t a problem but a choice: ‘We do not want to have demands because we are not addressing the state. Occupation is its own demand.’ But this was an unbelievably stupid thing to say because the reality was that the movement at its beginning was so inclusive and amorphous that it was not capable of making demands as a group. There was not enough of any kind of social cohesion, any kind of common interest, from which demands could be formulated. Instead of addressing that, the discussion was formed around ‘demands are bad; anybody who wants us to make demands is trying to hijack the movement or eliminate its potential.’

But what was also exciting about it initially was that not having demands created a space of desire so that the mainstream media and politicians went nuts. Everybody wanted to know: ‘What do they want?’ It was a wonderful proof of the truth of Lacanian theory’s account of the gap of desire. There was this gap and it did incite a lot of enthusiasm and desire and that was good. It was obviously not planned but there was an immense benefit to that openness. By early November, though, the demands group was fragmenting, the more liberal and independent members would take everything that the rest said and would red-bait it and say:

‘You guys are communists; this will never wash with the 99%.’ And because of the Anarchist principles of consensus that required full or close to full agreement, they were able to block proposals nearly all the time. Other people were in the group constantly saying that the group should not exist and also blocking decisions. So that was a problem.

polar/Krisis: *You said that Occupy enabled the Left to say ‘we’ again. But isn’t one of the big achievements of the historical Left that it was always wary of saying ‘we’ because it was aware of the exclusions resulting from such a ‘we’? Is this awareness incorporated into the movement and what are mechanisms expressing it? How can we reflect on these more problematic aspects of the ‘we’?*

JD: First, there is a very concrete procedure for dealing with the potential problems of an exclusive ‘we’ that is called the ‘progressive stack’. If people want to speak in a general assembly they get ‘on stack’. The progressive stack makes sure that people who have not spoken and/or are from historically disadvantaged or marginalized groups are moved up in the stack. That makes it impossible for privileged people to take up all the speaking time. Most working groups also adopted this mechanism. Secondly, there were multiple groups that were focused on women in the movement, racial differences, problems and issues for the undocumented etc. So there were particular caucuses and working groups on these very topics. So there was always self-consciousness in the movement. The assumption that everybody just forgot fifty years of difference theory is ludicrous.

However, at the same time the movement was deliberately divisive. 99 vs. 1: there is a real enemy. The problem in this regard I encountered at a number of different occupations I went to. One of the big issues was always whether the police are part of the 1 or the 99 per cent. I do not have one answer on that. It had to remain an open issue. In some places it makes sense to think of them as part of the 99 per cent because they were facing all kinds of budget cuts etc. On the other hand they were also functioning as agents and defenders of the 1 per cent. So the very place where the division was policed, as it were, became an antagonistic site where the question of difference remained unresolved in a useful way.

polar/Krisis: *Would the new type of party you were talking about also have mechanisms and procedures like the progressive stack and specific working groups in order to ensure it does not develop the rigid structures of former Communist parties?*

JD: Sure, as long as there is a Central Committee ... (general laughter).

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