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No Communicating Left

Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009). ISBN 978-0-8223-4505-3

Dean pulls few punches in her devastating critique of the American left for its complacency, its limited capacity, and even its lack of awareness of the need to offer a stand of political resistance to power. This is how she concludes her book:

The eight years of the Bush administration were a diversion. Intoxicated with a sense of purpose, we could oppose war, torture, indefinite detention, warrantless wiretapping, a seemingly endless series of real crimes... such opposition keeps us feeling like we matter... We have an ethical sense. But we lack a coherent politics. (p.175)

Dean highlights clearly the disintegration of the collective left and its simulacra in the individuated life-style politics of today's depoliticized radicalism, where it appears that particular individual demands and identities are to be respected but there is no possibility of universalising them into a collective challenge to the system: no possibility of a left which stands for something beyond itself. She argues that, rather than confront this problem, the left take refuge in the fantasy that technology will overcome their inability to engage and that the circulation of ideas and information on the internet will construct the collectivities and communities of interest, which are lacking in reality. For Dean, this 'technology fetishism' marks the left's failure: its 'abandonment of workers and the poor; its retreat from the state and repudiation of collective action; and its acceptance of the neoliberal economy as the "only game in town"' (p.33).

In fact, she uncovers the gaping hole at the heart of the left, highlighting that radicalism appears to be based less on changing the world than on the articulation of an alternative oppositional identity: a non-strategic, non-instrumental, articulation of a protest against power. In a nutshell, the left are too busy providing alternative voices, spaces and forums to think about engaging with mass society in an organised, collective, attempt to achieve

societal transformation. For Dean, this is fake or hollow political activity, pursued more for its own sake than for future political ends. This is a politics of ethical distancing, of self-flattery and narcissism, which excuses or even celebrates the self-marginalization of the left: as either the result of the overwhelming capacity of neoliberal power to act, to control, and to regulate; or as the result of the apathy, stupidity, or laziness of the masses - or the 'sheeple' (p.171) - for their failure to join the radical cause.

Dean suggests that the left needs to rethink its values and approaches and her book is intended to be a wake-up call to abandon narcissistic complacency. In doing this, she highlights a range of problems connected around the thematic of the left's defence of democracy in an age of communicative capitalism. She argues that the left's focus on extending or defending democracy by asserting their role in giving voice and creating spaces merely reproduces the domination of communicative capitalism, where there is no shared space of debate and disagreement but the proliferation of mediums and messages without the responsibility to develop and defend positions or to engage and no external measure of accountability. Communicative capitalism is held to thrive on this fragmented, atomizing, and individuated, framework of communication, which gives the impression of a shared discourse, community, or movement but leaves reality just as it is, with neoliberal frameworks of domination, inequality, and destruction continuing unopposed (pp.162-75).

This is not merely a critique of the US left; it is also a powerful deconstruction of its claims for a collective existence. She suggests this most strongly in her chapters on 'technology fetishism' and on the '9/11 truth' movement, in which she analyzes how individuals come together not on the basis of a collective political project, challenging power, but on the basis of an invitation for individuals to affirm their alienation from power and to produce, or to 'find out for themselves', their own personal 'truths'. These are not projects to change or to transform the external world but mechanisms whereby individuals can find meaning through their ethical individual actions and beliefs. She powerfully describes how '9/11 truth' movements are about individual affirmation rather than collective engagement. In this they can easily be equated with the mass anti-war demonstrations where individuals marched under the banner of 'Not in My Name', seeking personal affirmation in distancing themselves from politics rather than taking responsibility to engage in political struggle by the building of any collective movement (p.47).

The same atomization of left politics is analyzed in Dean's critique of the radical individualism at the heart of the displacement of politics with ethics. Here Judith Butler stands in as the exemplar for a left, which is alleged to have given up on conviction and political struggle and instead retreated into emphasising 'generosity to difference and awareness of mutual vulnerability' and to focus upon 'micropolitical and ethical practices that work on the self in its immediate reactions and relations' (p.123). Dean argues that the ethical turn appears to be a reflection of political despair and celebrates a denial of political struggle and strong subjectivity. Dean also, correctly, links this presentation of defeatism to a misconstruction of Foucault's work that understands power as operating free from politics. Using Butler as an example, she argues that 'Butler reads governmentality *as replacing* sovereignty', rather than as a discursive framing for the operation of political power (p.125). The intimation is that in seeing power as having shifted to the global level, free from states, political opposition is merely expressed in the ethical terms of engagement in 'discourses that shape and deform what we mean by "the human"' (p.135). This strongly resonates with the technological fetishism of the 'global politics' of networked communication which encourages the transformation of politics into the ethics of virtual participation.

So far so good. As a description of post-political radicalism Dean makes some fine points regarding the dead end which has been reached. The psychological framing of the responses and problems of the left is the book's fundamental weakness, leading Dean to focus on Lacanian analysis, laced with Zizek, and including a repetition of this methodological framing across the chapters (which were originally penned as self-standing journal articles). Firstly, this does the argument no favours and appears to be evasive and too unnecessarily abstract and distancing. For example, the target of the US 'academic and typing left' (p.123) seems too vague and the material too thinly spread, from the '9/11 truth' campaign to Judith Butler to advocates of internet freedom. The deeper problem is that the vague and abstract target of the 'US left' appears to be merely a stand-in for a psychologised critique of US society itself.

In providing a psychological analysis of the attraction of the self-centred communication of left protest, opposition, or awareness, Dean neither politically grounds the collapse of externally-orientated collective struggle nor indicates how or why this collapse may be only a contingent rather than a necessary one. She seems to hint that prior to communicative capitalism and the expansion of networked information technologies there was a possibility

for the left to take up a democratic politics based upon open, shared, engagement and contestation, whereas today critical intervention in the public sphere is asserted to be no longer possible. In fact, to engage publically appears to engage on the terrain of the enemy:

The ideal of publicity functions ideologically, serving global capitalism's reliance on networked information technologies and consumers convinced that their every blog post, virtual march, or YouTube upload is a radical act rather than an entertaining diversion. Communicative capitalism mobilizes the faith in exposure animating democracy as the perfect lure. Subjects feel themselves to be active even as their every activity reinforces the status quo. (p.148)

Dean seems keen to argue that the left achieved their own defeat in their 'victory' in the 'Culture Wars' which established the basis of neoliberal communicative capitalism, which shares the left's assumptions regarding 'assertions of difference, singularity, and the fluidity of modes of becoming' and the politics of consumer choice (p.9). We seem caught in a double-bind, where the success of the left has resulted in the hegemonic ideological discursive practices of communicative capitalism and communicative capitalism has undermined the possibilities of the construction of a public sphere and possible radical or universal collectivities capable of democratic contestation.

However, if there is no public sphere in which collective identities can be formed it would appear that 'radicals' have little option but to engage in 'global' individuated ethical protest. Dean's own 'technological fetishism' and abstract psychological framing appear to close down possibilities rather than opening them; installing communicative capitalism as the agency of power rather than as an ideological framework which reflects the vacuum remaining after the demise of the political left. In which case, she could take a leaf out of her own book (p.12) and consider whether her thesis 'erases its own standpoint of enunciation' in its dismissal of our public and democratic capabilities. It seems she has no way out of the double-bind beyond making one more contribution to the information overload which is her communicative capitalism.

David Chandler