CRITICAL MEDIA STUDIES IN TIMES OF COMMUNICATIVE CAPITALISM: AN INTERVIEW WITH JODI DEAN

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INTRODUCTION

Jodi Dean draws from a wide field of interests, ranging from political theory, post-structuralism and psychoanalysis to neoliberalism, cultural studies and feminist theory. But her work is, above all, interested in contemporary space and the possibility of politics (Dean, 1996; 1997; 2002; 2006; Passavant & Dean 2004). Her most recent research and writings focus especially on the correlation between digital media and such political environments and opportunities (Dean, 2009; 2010a; Dean, Anderson & Lovink, 2006). Arguing in clear and outspoken prose, or what might also be called a provocative and even 'radical' perspective, her publications have gained worldwide attention. Not for no reason she has recently been described as 'a rising star' (Dean 2010b).

Instead of highlighting communitarian effects of digital media, Dean deconstructs common accounts of the public sphere and points towards the drastic shortcomings of the internet and its digital tools as mass culture (Dean, 2003; 2009). This skepticism towards the emancipatory and democratising effects of mediated communication emerges already in her time as a PhD candidate under the supervision of Jean Cohen at Columbia University; and more specifically, during her stay as a visiting PhD researcher at the *Institute for Social Research* in Frankfurt, Germany in the 1990s. Critically reflecting on the institute's leading figures at that time, Dean cultivates a line of thought that stands in stark contradiction to the reasoning put forward by Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth.

Perpetually advancing and updating her argument to the scenarios of informational societies, Dean sees everyday communicative exchanges enabled through media resources as not only undermining capacities for democracy, but also entrapping people in a specific mode of domination. In particular the expansion and intensification of communication and entertainment networks yields not democracy, but something else entirely: communicative capitalism (Dean, 2009; 2010). Instead of leading to more equitable distributions of wealth and influence or enabling the emergence of a richer variety in modes of living and practices of freedom, the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world's people (Dean & Passavant, 2004).

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Jodi Dean is currently Professor of Political Science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, a liberal arts college in Geneva, New York. She runs a blog and is currently finishing a manuscript entitled *The Communist Horizon* for Verso (forthcoming 2012). In this interview, conducted before her keynote at the *Taking Control* conference at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, Dean talks about the value of critical theory for media studies, the decline of symbolic efficiency and the necessity of a (global) revolution to bring about change.

PLATFORM: In your latest book Blog Theory, you say that, 'critical media theory is possible when it occupies the trap of its emergence, not when it offers happy solutions … A media theory that is critical has to forswear the affective enterprise of contributing the feeling-impulses of hope and reassurance and offer thinking instead' (Dean, 2010, p. 32). And indeed, the theory you put forward is much more on the 'critical' than the 'happy' side. Put bluntly, you are indicating that contemporary communications media capture their users in intensive and extensive networks of enjoyment, production, and surveillance. Your term for this formation is 'communicative capitalism'. Could you please remind us what you mean by communicative capitalism?

Jodi Dean: Communicative capitalism is the merger of democratic ideals and capitalism. A basic way to think about this is: What is the Habermasian ideal of communication? It is inclusion, discussion, reciprocity, and everyone getting a chance to speak for as long as they want. That's the internet – one of the key instruments of the spread and consolidation of global neoliberalism. It is one of the primary ways that capitalism operates today in that capitalism has subsumed globally (almost) everyone through networks of communication. Inclusion, as in getting connected into the communication networks that serve contemporary capitalism, is championed as necessary, vital, crucial. Communication networks are supposed to let more and more people and firms find markets and be more competitive. And at the same time, they are supposed to enhance participation and thus democracy. The merger of the two is treated as natural, something it wouldn't even make sense to question. So if you think about where we are now as a stage of capitalism where communication is the dominant mode, the exact same processes and practices that are democratic in fact are the ones that configure capitalism.

PLATFORM: It is through this notion of communicative capitalism that you evolve the concept of the 'decline of symbolic efficiency' – a concept rooted in thoughts of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Slavoj Žižek. The idea that symbols increasingly lose their power to transmit significance from one person to another and from one setting to another, however, seems to contradict contemporary tendencies like the increasing 'emotionalisation' through symbols in politics and media. Glenn Beck, for example, putting Barack Obama next to Mao and a swastika. Or if we look back to Iran in 2009, perhaps the single greatest impact of the internet on the Green Movement was the YouTube video that documented the death of Neda Agha-Sultan. Does your notion of symbolic inefficiency perhaps more specifically argue for a decline of 'left' symbolic efficiency?

JD: I think we have to unpack this question. The first thing I want to say is that Glenn Beck does not use symbols but uses images and affects. He doesn't open up a space where a symbol is possible for discussion or re-signification. Instead it is: here is Hitler, here is Obama and this feels 'yucky'. But these alignments are not functioning as symbols rather they are bits of emotion. My god, most Americans don't even know the difference between fascism and communism. That is why I think that Glenn Beck does not counter my thesis of the decline of symbolic efficiency.

With any of the Middle East revolutions it is a huge mistake to reduce them to their new media practice. I think this is a bizarre kind of colonising, to try to make them like the ideal of communicative democracy that is so much valued in the United States and in Europe and to not recognize the actual material and physical struggles, the labour movements, the organized people on the street as really what are the mobilising forces.

PLATFORM: Why, then, focus on 'symbolic' instead of 'material efficiency'?

JD: The way I think about it is that the decline of symbolic efficiency helps us to understand how it is the case – as Agamben and Hardt and Negri have pointed out – that we have communication without communicability. That is, in the flow of affects and impressions, communicative utterances are reduced to contributions. They are flattened out so that any contribution is equal to any other. As a contribution to contemporary information networks, a photograph of a cute kitten is communicatively equivalent to news of a natural disaster or a report on particular instances of governmental corruption. This entails, then, a kind of loss for political action insofar as it is extraordinarily difficult to install a gap in the overall communicative flow, to act in a way that breaks with rather than reinforces the dominance of communicative capitalism.

I would agree that we have to focus on the material domain, and the material aspects of the movements. But, I don't view communication as immaterial – how could it be immaterial? First of all, there are actual, embodied people communicating … well, sometimes, other times there are just annoying robocalls or computer bots, but these, two, are material, reliant on silicon chips and machines and fibre optic cables and so on and so forth.

The mistake I am trying to diagnose is the one that reduces politics to democracy and that thereby reduces politics to getting messages out and communicating rather than viewing politics as the 'struggling' on the ground. And I don't think that is just a problem of the left, though the left has been very enthusiastic about new media. I think it is a more general problem and it is one that makes political organising very difficult in the US and Europe for anything other than capital – and things appear to be easy on that side.

PLATFORM: It has become almost common sense to argue that once we acknowledge the multiplicity of the sites of politics, and of democracy, we must also acknowledge the multiplicity of the subjects and forms of politics and democracy. You half-jokingly refer to this move as 'adding an s' (Dean 2003: 96), because you think it does not entail a serious re-conceptualisation of anything much. But is it not essential, as Noortje Marres (2005) has highlighted, to recognise that it is not self-evident which subjects are to be taken into account as part of democratic processes, or which forms of democracy are to be enacted?

JD: I am not so worried about democracy. We must stop voicing and expressing the need for radical egalitarian redistribution and elimination of capitalism as if this were democracy or as if this kind of political ambition could be subsumed under the heading democracy. When people talk about the multiplicity of subjects these days that is like consumer goods. That is, every position is the same as every other, everything has got to be included in some kind of a big tank. That is a consumer approach to viewpoints in that it assumes that the existence of view requires acknowledgement or inclusion or even validation of that view. I mean, why would anyone want to make sure to include racist subjects or misogynist subjects? Rather, we must say that these viewpoints are wrong and regressive and they are not the ones that are going to be useful for an egalitarian people struggle.

Anything else is just adding an 's', as if infinite pluralisation were a political choice

rather than either a statement of ontology – things are in becoming – or a statement of capital's own tempt to proliferate goods and sites. But it is not a politics.

I am currently working on a book with the preliminarily title The Communist Horizon that is mainly concerned with organisational questions and issues. Organization is crucial for a movement to have duration and not get folded back or subsumed into claims like 'we need awareness', 'we need inclusion', 'we need access' or reduced to a kind of libertarian emphasis on each individual's free choices.

I should add here that I completely disagree with these new lines in political theory influenced by Bruno Latour. They emphasize the agency of objects, the way things have impacts that cannot be reduced to human intentionality. Well of course this is in part true – but it's obvious. Computers fail constantly. The objects in my bookbag are constantly pressing the buttons on my Blackberry, calling people and letting them listen in on my conversations. But it's important to remember that humans cannot be reduced to intentionality either; this is the basic lesson of psychoanalysis – the unconscious, the desires and drives that make us who we are even as they forever elude us. And, isn't it interesting that at a time when political agency is in crisis, when the dominant thematic is one of post-politics and post-democracy, that rather than attempting to cut through the predominance of things, this Latour-inspired political theory joins up with them, investing them with human's missing agency? A friend of mine (from Goldsmiths, actually) has said that this preoccupation with things is just another form of commodity fetishism. I think he's right, but only up to a point – it's also ontology fetishism.

PLATFORM: Alain Touraine argues that, 'If you believe in the implacable domination of economic forces, you cannot believe in the possibility of social movements' (Touraine, 2001, p. 3). Although you acknowledge that any transformative politics today will have to grapple with digital media, your view that we all reside in what you call a 'media trap' (Dean, 2010) appears to be all-inclusive. Is there a way out of this trap?

JD: What does that quote even mean? Who would claim the 'implacable domination of economic forces'? Certainly not Marx! Economic domination is coextensive with class struggle – it's hardly 'implacable'. Anyway, on the media trap. It's tricky. You are right to say that the way I've been talking about it may be too close to 'implacable'. I have been thinking about this apparently inescapable trap in a few different ways. In Blog Theory I mention two. One way is to recognize that the system can't keep going and it will get to points of collapse and destruction; this way is intrinsic to capitalism. So there's the natural inevitability of crises. It's not a great political point but it is one of the ways that the system breaks down. And, there is something to it insofar as it tells 'the left' that we have to be organized, ready, united so as to be able to deal with crises when they arise. The tragedy of the 2008 economic crisis is that there was no organized alternative response. In the US, this absence has been filled by the reprehensible Tea Party which is making major strides towards destroying the few remaining achievements of the twentieth century.

Another way the system breaks down is when people actively make it break down. And this, again, can happen in different ways. We have, for example, seen the revolutions in the Middle East. It is really exciting seeing people forcing a change. Less visible forms of this are hackers. Hackers broke into the French finance ministry in December 2010 and the Pentagon early this year and that is pretty impressive as well. I think these are just some possible sites of change.

My discussion of communicative capitalism does not require that we the subjects are all idiots and deceived. It is rather our practices that are the problem, not what we know. It

is not that we become subjects who do not have a clue. It is that we are subjects who in all our different efforts end up in reproducing the system. So the question has got to be, how to find ways not to reproduce the system. And I think when you break it down it does not reproduce and when there are deliberate acts like hacking it might not reproduce either.

PLATFORM: Yet, applying your notion of communicative capitalism to the upheaval in North African nations, one might argue: they managed to establish change but now they simply are in a similar situation that people in democracies around the globe are.

JD: They are not in the same situation because it is harder for us to argue against a 'tyrant'. We simply are not under that kind of dictatorship. Overthrowing dictators and tyranny is a completely different question than: What does it mean to overthrow a democracy? There are examples in history of right-wing overthrows of democracy. But for a left-oriented collective, that is harder. And it is risky and uncertain. I believe it is communism or barbarism. The barbarism is getting worse in the US, the UK and most of Europe because of the rampant inequality and the finance sector's increasing hold that is not sustainable. The question is: How do we respond as our societies are declining? Do we seize the reigns and make them go some place else or do we scrap for the little pieces?

PLATFORM: In a recent talk at the Goldsmiths and Sage symposium on the future of democracy, you said that change can only be brought about by a global 'we' and not by local activities that focus, for example, on modes of consumption. How do you think would it be possible to create a global 'we space', and would such space only be possible on a global scale?

JD: Ultimately it – the abolition of capitalism – is only possible on a global scale. If we think about global communications, we already have a global scale. We also have a global transport and a global finance system. And the alter-globalization movement did important work in building networks of activists all over the world. So the interconnections are already there. Further, if we think in terms of the idea of the 'common' (as in the important work of Hardt and Negri, Cesare Casarino and others coming out of the Italian context) we already recognize that we as a 'global we' are making and producing things together. And, of course, localism makes no sense; it seems to idealize some kind of agrarian ideal where small groups make what they need to survive? I mean, really, is that the only alternative to capitalism? Hardly, we already know that collective ventures can be organized on a global scale.

Anyway, how is the global revolution possible? Maybe we should ask: how is it not possible? The fascinating thing about the recent mid-east revolutions has been the contagious effects and the way they've made contemporary problems and inequalities visible as global. But it's going to take organising and duration. I think a good step involves more imagining, lots of leaps of imagination and thought experiments that say: how do we do it; how do we think that something like this can be possible? Training ourselves to re-imagine it and then training ourselves to think through the steps and then implementing them. This is necessary to enact an organisational model that lets people realise that there are new ways of organising the possible. This sounds speculative, and it is speculative but imagining those steps is a move towards exercising them.

We can take the recent protests and occupations against the rise of tuition fees and cuts in the public sector in the UK as an example. People start thinking: how do we want to reorganise not only the university but England; how do we want to reorganise not just England but the EU; and how do we see this in a global context? At each step, the 'we' changes

and grows – and of course encounters new difficulties and oppositions, which compel choices and decisions that strengthen the emergent organization. As long as neo-liberalism is our dominant economic model all the education pursuits in the world are meaningless. The neoliberal economy doesn't need a middle class and that's why, for example, education is cut. But how long will people continue their quality of life decline? How long will they go on and let states cut more and more services?

PLATFORM: Given the fact that media (technologies) become increasingly omnipresent what is the future of critical media studies? If the object disappears in the daily realm of normality, other fields (e.g. sociology, political economy etc.) might be better places to start looking at media.

JD: If we think in terms of academic fields, the often-made distinctions are artificial, because it makes no sense, for example, to talk of political science without sociology, but yet they are still separate fields. And it makes no sense to have sociology without anthropology as well. So all these disciplinary boundaries blur if we think of academic fields as starting points for questions rather than as forms of expert knowledge with some kind of complete and all-encompassing jurisdiction over particular questions.

A lot of media studies unfortunately ends up being either pointless content analysis, training for people to become media manipulators, or generic counting and measuring. Critical media studies, in contrast, is explicitly political, and is explicitly concerned with how communications are used in ways that change people's subjectivity, in ways that change our life chances, and finally, with how we can change them. So the future of media studies is in the critical and this critical direction will and must reject arbitrary disciplinary distinctions. In fact, to say anything important at all, media studies has to make explicit the role of media in maintaining capitalism.

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