



Time to party?

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review of

Dean, Jodi (2016): *Crowds and party*. London: Verso. (HB, pp 288, £13.59, ISBN 978-1-78168-694-2)

Since the decline of classical Marxist theory and the concomitant proliferation of ‘new social movements’ from 1968 and onwards, two opposing lines of thought have dominated leftist thinking: One that could be called ‘horizontalist’ and one that could be called ‘verticalist’ (Prentoulis and Thomassen, 2013). While both lines of thought identify with the label of post-Marxism – sometimes even without apologies – their approaches to radical politics differ profoundly. Crudely put, the difference revolves around the question of organization, and whether or not radical politics requires any centralized form of coordination. In the horizontalist camp, authors like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000) and Paolo Virno (2004) argue that the networked and globalized character of contemporary sovereignty demands a networked kind of resistance, that is, a resistance that lacks any center or single point of unity. As they say: ‘It takes a network to fight a network’ (Hardt and Negri, 2004: 58). This means replacing the essentialist notion of the working class with a more plural and polycentric subject called the Multitude. Through the notion of the Multitude, the horizontalists advocate a less organized version of radical politics that shuns unity and affords autonomy. But perhaps more importantly, like the anarchists, they promote a radical politics that withdraws from established political institutions.

In the verticalist camp, on the other hand, authors like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) agree that the privileged subject of the working class should be substituted by a thoroughly plural and inherently contingent figure. However, instead of completely abandoning the quest for unity, they advocate a revival of ‘the people’ as a necessary component of any radical politics (Laclau, 2006). Through the notion of ‘the people’ – empty as it may be – progressive forces are allowed to unite behind a counter-hegemonic project, capable of contesting and ultimately replacing dominant discourses. Hence, instead of trying to change the world without taking power, as the horizontalists would have it (e.g., Holloway, 2002), the verticalists emphasize the necessity of reclaiming sovereignty by engaging actively with the state (Mouffe, 2009). However, as Simon Critchley (2004) has noted, there seems to be a normative deficit in Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony. While the theory was originally conceived as a conceptual toolbox for the postmodern Left, right-wing forces have also found resonance in concepts like discourse and hegemony (see Éric Zemmour’s (2014) book, *Le Suicide Français*, for a recent example). This, arguably, constitutes a problem for the Left and its radical aspirations.

With Jodi Dean’s passionate writings, a third line of leftist thought has arrived or, rather, returned. While Dean shares Laclau and Mouffe’s emphasis on the necessity of engaging the state by building alternative hegemonic projects, she rejects their persistent focus on pluralism and contingency as ‘leftist realism’ and scolds them for succumbing to the logic of what she calls ‘communicative capitalism’ (i.e. the current variety of capitalism, made possible by the widespread use of information and communication technologies, which turns democracy into a marketplace by commodifying communication). By making contingency and pluralism the main pillars in their theoretical framework, Dean argues, Laclau and Mouffe implicitly accepts the marketplace as a necessity and thus abandons the revolutionary propensities of leftist thinking prior to 1968. Hence, like Critchley – but in an utterly different way – Dean makes it her project to reintroduce normativity to contemporary left-wing theorizing. The way to do so, she suggest, is through the resurrection of the communist party.

Politicizing the crowd

Dean rose to prominence with her 2012 book, *The Communist Horizon*, in which she argued that communism is too often equated with the atrocities of Stalinism, and that communism, by implication, has been unfairly rejected as a non-viable alternative to neoliberalism. For this reason, Dean argues, the time has come for communism to rise from the dust of 1989 and re-introduce itself as *the* leftist ideology of the 21st Century. Upon its publication, the book received mixed reviews.

While it certainly stroke a chord with many student activists and readers of a more militant persuasion, others considered the resurrection of communism a far cry from realistic, let alone desirable. Much of the criticism hinged on Dean's repeated invocation of the somewhat ill-defined notion of 'the party' as a necessary continuation of movements like Occupy Wall Street. As Jeffery C. Isaac (2013: 105), writing in the journal *Dissent*, puts it:

What are we to make of this endorsement of "communism?" In one sense, an answer is easy: not very much. For Dean advances no specific arguments about any actual problem, movement, or party. "The party" is an abstraction, repeatedly invoked. What party? Who? Where? There is a shocking lack of specificity to her presentation.

In her most recent book, *Crowds and Party*, Dean (2016) sets out to refute such criticism (though this objective is never explicitly stated). Needless to say, the purported virtues of communism still play a central part in this book, but the primary focus has shifted from questions of ideology to questions of form. The main discussion no longer revolves around communism as a superior horizon that somehow 'conditions our experience', but around what type of organization that is best suited to spearhead the battle against capitalism. Dean takes the recent upsurge in popular uprisings (The Arab Spring, Indignados, Occupy etc.) as her main point of departure. By referring to these mass-mobilizations as 'crowds', she invokes a grand body of literature that ranges from the writings of Gustave Le Bon and Sigmund Freud to the contemporary hype around buzzwords like 'crowdsourcing' and 'hive mind'. Drawing on the work of Elias Canetti in particular, Dean arrives at a conceptualization of the crowd as a collective being that is configured by a so-called 'egalitarian discharge', which is best conceived as an 'intense experience of substantive collectivity' [5]. Through the egalitarian character of the crowd, the argument goes, people are allowed to escape the ideological grip of communicative capitalism by imagining themselves as more than just individuals. In the crowd, people become one rather than many.

However, while the egalitarian crowds of the early 21st Century certainly disrupted the neoliberal status quo, they never manages to achieve any real change at the level of realpolitik, thus making it yet another case of *plus ça change*. That, Dean argues, is due to the fact that the 'crowd disruption', far from being something political in itself, is merely an opportunity for politics. As such, the crowd does not have a politics until someone rises to the occasion and articulates a political direction. The current proliferation of crowds – and the apolitical character of these collectives – thus begs the question of organization. As Dean puts it in the introductory chapter: 'Through what political forms might we advance?' Knowing her previous publications, the immediate answer comes as no surprise: 'For many of us, the party is emerging as the site of an answer' [4]. Hence, the essence of

Crowds and Party is quickly revealed: If the Left wants to achieve real change, it cannot rely solely on the power of crowds (to use an expression from the contemporary hype-literature). While crowds might serve to disrupt the dominant order, it takes a political party to kick the ball across the goal line. However, as the attentive reader might have guessed, not just any party will do. But before we jump to conclusions, let us first consider the book's five chapters one at a time.

A (perhaps not so) brief summary

In the book's first chapter, 'Nothing personal', Dean unfolds a compelling critique of contemporary capitalism's individualizing tendencies. Through an exposé of corporate campaigns like Dr. Pepper's *Always one of a kind* and Coca Cola's *Share a coke* (one could easily add other campaigns like Reebok's *I am what I am* or Android's *Be together, not the same*), Dean explains how the discourse of communicative capitalism fragments people by reducing them to isolated entities. The sad thing is, presumably, that the Left has bought into the idea of the individual as a privileged agent. To substantiate this claim, Dean leaps headlong into a critique of what she calls 'leftist individualism' or 'leftist realism', depending on the target of her criticism. The individualists are writers, such as Charles Leadbeater and Rosalind Brunt, who, towards the end of the 1980s, argued that the rise of Thatcherism and 'individual consumerism' demanded a socialist response that likewise placed the individual at the center of its political program. The realists are, as already mentioned, those intellectuals that substituted the economic determinism of classical Marxism for a post-Marxist focus on democracy and pluralism. According to Dean, both individualists and realists are guilty of betraying the progressive agenda by abandoning collectivity altogether. As she puts it: 'To call on people to ground their politics in the personal experience that differentiates them from others is to reinforce capitalist dynamics of individuation' [35].

Though lucidly written, the main purpose of the book's first chapter, one suspects, is to construct a leftist straw man worthy of debunking. For instance, why would a post-foundational approach to politics, such as the one advocated by Laclau and Mouffe, translate into an acceptance of the marketplace as an ontological necessity, as Dean seems to suggest on page 54? Would the point not be the exact opposite: That nothing – and certainly not the marketplace – can be viewed as a necessity? Anyhow, if one proceeds beyond the first chapter, things get much more interesting. In the second chapter, 'Enclosing the subject', Dean sets out to reverse Louis Althusser's well-known dictum that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects. While Althusser's idea is that individuals are subjectified through the ideological grip of dominant discourses, Dean suggests that subjects emerge only

when ideology fails. Drawing on Slovenian psychoanalysts like Mladen Dolar and Slavoj Žižek, she conceives the subject, not as a product of ideology, but as the ineradicable distance between the individual and ideology. This then allows Dean to argue that Althusser got it backwards: Ideology does not *subjectify* individuals, it *individuates* subjects [79].

What follows from the reversal of Althusser's interpellation thesis is that the subject is no longer 'pre-constrained to the individual form' [80]. Hence, in a much more sophisticated way, Dean picks up the argument from chapter one, namely that the individual is the imaginary figure *par excellence* of bourgeois ideology. This means that the subject, now emancipated from its essential connection to the individual, can be conceived as something collective, that is, as a collective condition for agency. In that way, the subject becomes political, or at least a vehicle for politics: Politics is only possible when ideology eludes us, and ideology only eludes us when individuals get to recognize themselves as part of a collective, i.e. as part of 'the people'. Here, it is important to note that 'the people' is not an ontological category for Dean. For instance, 'the people' cannot be reduced to the sum of those parts that are present in a crowd. The collective subject of 'the people' is always conditioned by an excess of meaning, often expressed through a common name (think of Occupy's famous meme, 'we are the 99 percent'). As Dean puts it:

[T]he people do not know what they want. They are not fully present to themselves. Conflicting and contradictory desires and drives render the people a split subject perpetually pushing to express, encounter, and address its own non-knowledge. [90]

Now, at this point, it is not so difficult to see where Dean is going. But before we get to the part where someone tells the 'the people' what they truly want, the book takes its reader on a journey through the crowd theories of Le Bon and Freud. The main purpose of this voyage into the complex world of group psychology seems to be to emphasize the importance of political leadership, while simultaneously fending-off accusations of vanguardism. For instance, while in Freud's account, the leader is conceived as a 'hypnotist' that is somehow able to 'rob the subject of his own will', Dean prefers Le Bon's conception of the crowd leader as a passive agent that merely acts as 'the nucleus of will around which the crowd forms' [111].

This then brings us to the third chapter, 'The people as subject: Between crowd and party', in which Dean sets out to fully unfold the book's main argument. Drawing on Elias Canetti's notion of the 'egalitarian discharge', Dean substantiates the argument from the previous chapter about the crowd not knowing what it wants. The egalitarian discharge, she explains, is the overwhelming feeling of equality that spontaneously erupts when a crowd assembles. The egalitarian discharge is a collective feeling of mass-enjoyment that serves to cancel all difference between those who participate in the crowd. An important point here is

that '[d]e-individuation accompanies intense belonging' [121]. It is the inescapable sense of equality – of collective subjectivity – that fuels the crowd's desire to unite in the struggle for justice. However, this energetic discharge will always be founded on negativity towards some kind of externality. As Dean notes: 'The crowd manifests the desire of the people, but without telling us what it's for...' [117]. As such, the concept of the egalitarian discharge allows Dean to argue that the crowd does not have a politics, until someone retroactively projects a political direction onto the crowd. Until then, the crowd remains but an opportunity for politics. As she explains:

The politics of the beautiful moment [the crowd disruption, *red.*] is no politics at all. Politics combines the opening with direction, with the insertion of the crowd disruption into a sequence or process that pushes one way rather than another. There is no politics until a meaning is announced and the struggle over this meaning begins. [125]

For Dean, the crowd is thus not the same as 'the people' – at least not until someone associated with the crowd articulates a positive political agenda. This is where the party enters the picture. According to Dean, the party is the only organizational form that is capable of sustaining the egalitarian discharge while pushing for social change. The political challenge for the party is thus to maintain fidelity to the egalitarian ethos of the crowd disruption while providing the crowd – now known as 'the people' – with a sense of political direction [145]. In that way, 'the people' can be said to exist somewhere between the crowd and the party. While the crowd cuts open a crack in the dominant order, the party's job is to retroactively determine the road ahead. In short, without the party, there can be no people. As Dean poetically puts it: 'Because the party looks for them, the people are found' [158].

In the fourth chapter, 'More than many', Dean returns to the conversation with the 'leftist realists' about the role of the party in contemporary left-wing thought. The basic idea is to invoke scholars like Robert Michels and Rosa Luxemburg as a way of countering the contemporary Left's rejection of the party form as an authoritarian and undemocratic part of radical politics (see e.g., Holloway, 2002; Newman, 2007). So, instead of focusing on the necessity of political leadership in and of itself, as was the case in chapter two, Dean turns her attention to the necessity of the political party as a particular organizational configuration. Especially Michels' (1911) seminal work on 'the iron law of oligarchy' in modern democracies plays a grand part in Dean's argument. Michels' point, which seems to echo the writings of his tutor, Max Weber, is that there is an oligarchic drive in all democracies. In fact, in any kind of human association, Michels argues, the few will end up with more than the many. As Dean bluntly puts it: 'If democracy means rule by the many, democracy is impossible' [172]. This then leads to the logical

conclusion that the intense spirit of equality that infuses the crowd with energy and desire cannot be maintained forever. The crowd's very nature, Dean argues, 'makes it vulnerable to oligarchy' [173]. Even the most anarchist types of organizations will eventually succumb to authoritarian dynamics – or so the argument goes. As such, the crowd needs something extra that allows it to maintain the egalitarian discharge. That extra is, of course, the party.

This takes us to the book's final chapter, in which history seems to repeat itself. True to its title, the chapter sets out to explore 'the passionate dynamics of the communist party', and why the communist party is the only organization capable of translating the egalitarian discharge into actual politics. Dean opens the chapter with a lovely story from the annals of the American communist party. The story is about a Jewish woman from New York called Lilly who is afraid of telling her father that she wants to marry a non-Jewish man of Chinese heritage. Lilly, a 'conscientious communist', turns to the leader of the party's branch on the Lower East Side for advice. To comfort her, the leader tells her that he will accompany Lilly to her father's house and tell him about the wedding plans. 'You'll go with me?', Lilly then asks. And the leader replies: 'Not only me (...) we'll take the whole damn Communist Party'. A months later, Lilly tells the party leader that she managed to singlehandedly confront her father, only because she felt the presence of the whole party in the room with her [211].

This short story serves as a stepping-stone for Dean to apply a rather peculiar perspective on the communist party. Instead of examining the party in terms of ideology, organizational structure or historical development (which, in light of previous events, would seem advisable), Dean views the communist party as nothing but an 'affective infrastructure that enlarges the world' [210]. As such, Dean spends most of chapter five recounting a series of stories about the communist party as a 'generator of enthusiasm' for those involved [225]. Nowhere does she properly consider the political program of the communist party, and why the communist party is the only party capable of offering a psychic space from which the crowd is able to recognize itself as 'the people'. It seems like a gross fallacy to assume some kind of essential bond between the crowd and the communist party, especially when this bond is never justified in terms of political, organizational and/or historical arguments. Whoever said that the crowd only consists of comrades in becoming? If anything, the recent rise of popular movements from Hong Kong and Ukraine to Brazil and Spain testifies to the inherently diverse and, ultimately, irreconcilable nature of crowds.

Occupy: A case in point?

Returning to the first pages of the book, *Crowds and Party* begins where *The Communist Horizon* ended: With a combined appraisal and critique of the Occupy movement. Paraphrasing Naomi Klein, Dean's argument is that Occupy became 'the most important thing in the world' because it managed to disrupt the provisional hegemony of neoliberalism by successfully exposing the wrongs of capitalism (see also Dean, 2011). However, the shared feeling of importance quickly faded with the movement's persistent focus on autonomy and horizontalism as organizing principles. To illustrate her point, Dean recalls a speech made by a tall, 'revolutionary looking' man at a general assembly on October 15, 2011. The topic of the assembly was whether the occupiers should spread from Zuccotti Park (the initial site of occupation) to Washington Square Park. According to Dean, the mood in the crowd was equally enthusiastic and egalitarian.

But then, suddenly, the man gets up and starts to speak. His main point is that not all occupiers may be ready to embark on yet another occupation: 'Each person has to make their own autonomous decision', he argues. 'No one can decide for you (...) Everyone is an autonomous individual' [3]. Contrary to a strikingly similar episode in the Monty Python movie, *Life of Brian*, this speech immediately broke the mood (or at least Dean's mood). The crowd was no longer one, but many. Regardless of whether or not the mood actually broke, this episode raises an interesting question about the organization of crowds, which is unfortunately obscured by Dean's preoccupation with communism and the communist party. So, let us for a moment set aside our Bolshevik aspirations and isolate the immensely important question that Dean rightly poses in the introduction: 'Through what political forms might we advance?' [4].

Skipping to the end of *Crowds and Party*, Dean makes the argument that, in order to endure, the crowd needs a 'movement party' to advance its cause at an institutional level. According to Dean, a movement party is a party that replaces the worn-out notion of a vanguard party with a 'form of organized political association that holds open the space from which the crowd can see itself (and be seen) as the people'. It is a party that 'transfers the egalitarian intensity from the particular to the universal' [259]. Even though Dean goes to great lengths to debunk Ernesto Laclau's version of radical politics, she often borrows his vocabulary. This is, for instance, the case with the conceptualization of 'the universal' and 'the particular' (which, of course, is not exclusive to Laclauian terminology). According to Laclau, the universal and the particular are two fundamentally unbridgeable, yet interrelated, levels of the social that host different kinds of identities. While particular identities are conceived as differential, in the

sense that they can be clearly separated from one another, universal identities are formerly particular identities that have surrendered some of what initially made them differential in order to represent what Laclau calls ‘the absent fullness of the community’ (1994: 174).

Laclau’s point is that, in order to represent ‘the people’ as a whole, a universal identity must itself lack particular content. Otherwise, the universal would be contaminated by particularity, which would prevent it from actually claiming to represent ‘the people’. As such, the universal should be conceived as a more or less empty space occupied by a so-called ‘empty signifier’ (Laclau, 2001). Now, if we take Occupy as our point of reference and analyze it in terms of the universal/particular relationship, it becomes clear that Occupy began as a particularized project, but quickly ended up as a highly universal identity embodied by the well-known meme ‘we are the 99 percent’ (Husted and Hansen, 2017). For instance, in *The Declaration of the Occupation of New York City*, which serves as the movement’s first official statement as a collective, a long sequence of non-prioritized grievances are listed alongside each other. At the bottom of the declaration, a footnote reads: ‘These grievances are not all-inclusive’ (Occupy Wall Street, 2011). At a particular level, these grievances have little in common. At a universal level, however, they share something very fundamental, namely an overriding dissatisfaction with an unspecified actor called ‘they’. It takes little knowledge of Occupy to know that ‘they’ is the name of the movement’s constitutive outside, the wealthiest one percent of the population.

This list of grievances is easily interpreted as ‘chain of equivalences’, which is a fundamental characteristic of all universal projects (Laclau, 1994). In fact, it seems hard to imagine a more universal identity than the one emerging in Zuccotti Park during the fall of 2011. As such, the act of institutionalizing the egalitarian spirit of movements, such as Occupy, would not be a matter of further universalization. Instead, it would be a matter of particularizing an otherwise universal identity. Especially if the institutionalization was to be carried out by something as saturated and ‘contaminated’ as the communist party, the equivalential chain would be dramatically shortened. Accordingly, the party (be it communist or not) would never be able to claim to represent ‘the people’ in the same way that Occupy did and to some extent still does. Whether or not the new wave of left-wing parties, such as Podemos in Spain and The Alternative in Denmark, will be able to push for radical change while preserving the egalitarian discharge of the crowd remains to be seen. One thing seems more certain, however: the time for communist party politics has come and gone. Rather than resurrecting relics from a much too distant past, the institutional Left has to invent new and innovative ways of representing ‘the people’ if it wants to keep up with the passionate and forceful dynamics of the 21st Century crowd.

Negating negation: Dean's challenge to organization scholars

This review could have ended here with a wholesale rejection of Dean's final argument, but that seems a little too easy, especially since the question that is posed at the beginning of the book is both extremely pertinent and equally difficult to answer: through what political forms might we advance? In other words, how do we translate the political negation that crowds like Occupy represent into a positive force for change – how do we negate negation? As I see it, there are at least two possible answers to this question. One solution is simply to convince the crowd that the universal and the particular are commensurable, which is the solution that Dean seems to opt for. This involves what Laclau (2005: 105) calls 'impure' representation, meaning that identity flows primarily from representative to represented and not the other way around. In the case of Occupy, this would require a political actor capable of convincing the occupiers in Zuccotti Park that their universal protest against the 1% would find its one true manifestation in some kind of particular form (e.g. the communist party). This, however, seems more than just a little unlikely given the movement's complete lack of political direction. The second solution, which seems more viable, is to construct an organizational form that is somehow capable of sustaining the crowd's claim to universality despite the articulation of particular political demands (see Husted, 2017).

As critical organization scholars, I believe it is our duty to pursue this second option; that is, to explore different organizational configurations that allow activists to negate negation without losing sight of 'the people'. Fortunately, some authors have already ventured down that road, namely those associated with the field of research commonly known as 'alternative' or 'utopian' organizing (Parker, 2002; Parker et al., 2014). Here, a circle of empirically well-grounded researchers investigate a plethora of organizations that defy the hegemony of dominant discourses through different practices and procedures that all somehow prefigure an alternative society (e.g., Kokkinidis, 2015; Reedy et al., 2016; Sutherland et al., 2014). Of particular interest are those studies that explore the notion of political imagination, understood as the ability of groups and individuals to evoke 'imaginary significations' of that which does not yet exist (e.g. Komporozos-Athanasiou and Fotaki, 2015; Shukaitis, 2009; Wright et al., 2013). These studies are important for at least two reasons. First, they illustrate how effective resistance is 'as much a question of decolonizing the imagination as one of enacting new practices' (Fournier, 2008: 534), which is a point that is worth reiterating in a time where the old TINA-doctrine ('there is no alternative') all too often goes unchallenged. Secondly, they show us why the ability of organizations to keep open 'spaces of imagination' (Husted and Plesner, 2017), in which members can recognize themselves as part of 'the people', is vital if we want to successfully

translate the crowd disruption into a force for progressive change. Without such spaces, counter-hegemonic projects like Occupy lose the ability to build equivalential chains across different interests and identities, which would be detrimental to the movements' ability to survive and expand, but more importantly, detrimental to the Left's ability to pursue that which does not yet exist.

Naturally, this does not mean that further research into alternative / utopian / imaginative modes of organization constitutes a panacea, capable of resolving problems that have haunted the Left for more than half a century. But it does represent an attempt to wrestle with such problems by trying to translate negative critique into edifying dialogue, antagonism into agonism (Parker and Parker, 2017), and passivity into action. Now is indeed a good time to remember Marx's old dictum about changing the world instead of just trying to understand it, but now is *not* the time to party like Dean wants us to, despite her admirable effort to negate negation.

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