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THE HUMAN FACE OF NECESSARY DISCIPLINE
(Jodi Dean. *Comrade*. Verso 2019.)

I cannot write this review except in the first person singular, since it intersects with and is of great help to my longstanding efforts to draw a balance sheet of the communist movement, Marxism, and the Party form.^{1/} How can I and my S&D comrades use this important book, what questions are to be posed to it and beyond it but because of it? I'll discuss this in two parts and a coda.

1. *First*, this book intervenes into where we are at historically. I can only mention here, without taking yet into account, the "covidisation" impulse of the ruling classes to use a biological plague for open and drastic State dictatorship and surveillance of all personal movements, approaching the fascist example. Before this huge turn of the screw, Dean called it "racialized patriarchal capitalism" (C 16), but to my mind we would need at least three more factors (beside the fact that there are no races in the species *Homo sapiens sapiens*): the key role of finances, of capillary propagated ideology by new "communication" media controlling and determining people, and of national chauvinism and armed warfare as well as production of arms as prime system pillars. Dean has squarely faced the "communicative capitalism" and its foreclosure of alternative politics^{2/}; in this text she mentions but doesn't dwell on either financial capitalism or nationalism, immigrants, and warfare. This is perfectly OK for the text's purpose of presenting one crucial factor, the embodied communist personality, as a radical alternative generalizing mainly from US and similar experiences.

However, our historical moment -- which I would rather than Anthropocene call Capitalocene, for not all people are determining it, only capital -- shapes our experience as one of living in a huge chaos and deep alienation unleashed by powerful social forces wildly out of control. When we take into account the "astronomical demands on our attention" (C 14) and time by capillary communicative capitalism, the monograph scheme of progressing, like a railway trip, upon predetermined tracks from one's old dwelling to a higher lookout is no longer favoured: it is not possible any longer to hold a monolithic and static view of old home, belief in linear progress or clarity about what might be higher. Therefore, I much like her method of "speculative-compositive" narration that breaks with comfortable linearity. A fruitful alternative is to proceed by concentric wedges that, at times laboriously but also wittily and promisingly, limn a new center of value and understanding: here apply your lever and you shall move the Earth, Archimedes is reputed to have said.

Accordingly, Dean begins by recalling her approach to "comrade" in *Communist Horizon* and *Crowd and Party* (Verso 2012 and 2016), which see communism as the horizon of emancipatory politics and a communist party "as the political form necessary for this [left] politics" (C 5). This communism is a force of uncompromising anti-capitalist struggle in the lineage of her favorite exemplars Marx, Lenin, Kollontai, and the CP of USA before its degeneration in the 1940s. Dean's apodictic thesis is:

The [contemporary left's] rejection of the party [of communists] ... ignores the effects of association on those engaged in common struggle. It fails to learn from the everyday experiences of generations of activists, organizers, and revolutionaries. It relies on a narrow, fantasied notion of the party as a totalitarian machine. It neglects the courage, enthusiasm, and achievements of millions of party members for over a century. (C 6)

I agree with this stance but shall return at the end to some caveats I'd wish factored in.

The stance rejects a vision that chooses either individuals plus impersonal determining systems or group identities in whatever "alliance" permutations, because both deny the interest of the working

people as a whole. Both disempower radical politics – that is, class struggle, “the power of many” (C 13), especially should the working people get properly organized. Which leaves power in the hands of a capitalism “incapable of addressing climate change and the migrations and struggles that will result with anything other than militarism, walls, and genocide” (C 135).

Dean’s alternative is an association of comrades, those you can count on in the long political fight, who are accountable to each other and see own actions through the eyes of the comradely group. She develops the insistence of her *Crowds and Party* on how comrades imagine their collective against *the horizon* of communism and through the strategic invention of a *party* as the key to “the emancipatory egalitarian struggle of the proletarianized” against exploitation and oppression: “communism is ... the negation of the global capitalist present” (C 5). On the affirmative side, communism sees a life where people’s needs are met “from each according to ability to each according to needs,” as she paraphrases Marx (C 6), in “a society ... reorganized according to the free association, common benefit, and collective decision of the producers” (C 3) Within this horizon, the “uses of comrade as a mode of address, figure of belonging, and container for shared expectations ... can provide us with a view of political relation necessary for the present” (C 66): comrade is the personal equivalent of a party that is not a crowd.

A rich delimitation of the term is developed: how “comrade” differs from the accidental proximity of “neighbor” and the prevalently nationalist expression “comrade in arms,” how it transcends the family and “blood” connotations of gendered “brother,” and how it clashes with the Hobbesian cleavage into friend vs. enemy by the would-be Nazi theoretician Carl Schmitt; I shall return at the end to the Fascist *camerata* and the Nazi *Kamerad*. She resolutely and at length rejects the fashionable US quest for group alliances, concluding that “the ally is hierarchical, specific, and acquiescent, the comrade is egalitarian, generic, and utopian” (C 22). On the positive side, comrade differs also from “friend,” a direct relationship between two persons for the psychophysical benefit of each – a most worthy relation, but one that prescind from the affairs of the *polis* (politics). Friends are necessarily few and chosen; comrades may be many, even very many, but they are chosen impersonally as it were, by allegiance and for mutual support in political struggle -- and I would add sometimes, in truth, by holding one’s nose at some personal traits. “Anyone can be a comrade, whether or not they like me, whether or not they are like me,” and “Comradship abstracts ... from the uniqueness of lived experience. Friendship doesn’t.” (C 74 and 75), Dean splendidly concludes. A comrade is, I would say like a priest, permanently in embattled service of a superior truth, somewhat “inhuman” (C 75). Finally, the “militant” or “activist” is a function of the comrade translated into personal fight for the cause, “[a] political intensity, not political relationality” (C 78). The reflection on the Left needs to my mind also more on the family, surely the most important sociopolitical survival unit for most people.

Dean allots to the comrade “four primary characteristics: discipline, joy, enthusiasm, and courage” (C 85). I can think of movements on the Right that share three of them but never joy, to my mind, only a ferocious glee: joy brings an element of peace and non-enmity into this mixture, which may be only shared by devout yet unsectarian religionists. These are psychosomatic “concepts,” unfolded richly and helpfully in the following ten pages and recurring time and again; they entail a strong bodily, emotional participation, As this enters upon the vast and turbid ocean of the Subject and of emotions, in which I too have paddled, let me only say that more work by various hands is devoutly to be wished, but Dean’s is a considerable advance on Badiou’s *Theory of the Subject*, revised in *Logic of Worlds*, and Žižek’s refashioning of it in *Less Than Nothing*, both of which she deftly deconstructs. I conclude that reading this book, one can understand how comrade is necessarily a mobile spatial and ecumenical relation, but also one temporally indissoluble from the utopian look backward at our anti-

utopian times from a cleansed and harmonious future: it represents this qualitatively superior age in and through our embattled one.

The *Comrade* book is articulated into four chapters (four seems to be Dean's favorite number, very far from Hegel's subsumptive triad). I have so far dealt only with the first three: with chapters 1 and 2 I overwhelmingly agree, while chapter 3 is equally stimulating but I have doubts about some minor points, and mention here two:

--The 1939 movie *Ninotchka* pinpoints at its beginning well what is comradeship for a Soviet woman envoy, as Dean notes (C 67, 84-85). However, this Hollywood movie is, despite some nice touches and a sardonic joke here and there, on the whole a crude concoction celebrating the demise of comradeship when faced with superior Western luxury and a slick Latin lover, and the three Soviet envoys are the stock clowns of vaudeville; except for a good performance by Greta Garbo it is quite forgettable. The USSR of the late 1930s was not yet a sinister enemy but a mysterious competitor, here domesticated as a silly Ruritania, for example in the stock propaganda joke mocking the "failed" Five-Year-Plan. A strong disclaimer of this context would have been helpful here.

--Two brief references to Carl Schmitt (C 68, 100) treat him rightly as insufficient, but also as a "classic." The justifier of the violent "state of exception" and naked Nazi State terrorism against plebeian and revolutionary movements, in particular against armed partisans, can of course be learned from by contraries, but another disclaimer here is rendered more urgent by his frequent uncritical acceptance on the Left.

2. My *second part* deals with chapter 4, "You Are Not My Comrade," very important for our strategic decisions right now, elements of which connect "comrade" with "party" in a virtuous feedback loop: "The party is the organization out of which comradeship emerges and that comrade relations produce" (C 85). I have argued at length, in a by now insufficient essay "What Is To Be Done" (S&D 2016), that an efficient anti-capitalist political party can only begin by using one of Lenin's party models as the initial hypothesis, but supplemented by later experiences from two groups of sources. The first one would begin with Gramsci and continue with an analysis of positive and negative aspects within "socialism" from USSR, Yugoslavia, China, and Cuba — and where possible also from some other States and movements. The second one would rework experiences from within *citoyen* democracies in their early, not yet fully capitalized forms, as well as from the libertarian anarchist horizon, while rejecting their dogmatic tendency towards individualist chaos and inefficiency.

The great strength of Dean's final chapter is that it gives ample room to some such experiences, and in particular, how and why does comradeship -- and often also a virtuous party -- end. I shall focus on the domain of *discipline*, to which much of her final chapter is devoted through the subtitles Expulsion, Resignation, Drift, and The End of the World. The chapter begins with a paean to collective discipline that "provides the support that frees us to make mistakes, learn, and grow. When we err – and each of us will – our comrades will be there to catch us, dust us off, and set us right." (C 100) I much agree with this ideal horizon. It seems to have been often approximated by the CP USA practice of the 1930s in fighting for interracial solidarity among workers (exemplarily detailed in C 103-11). Yet if "comradeship is a choice – both for the one joining and the party joined" and if "Discipline negates and creates" (C 100 and 86), what happens when a communist or pseudo-leninist party is in partial or full power and grows into a repressive oligarchy, negating without creating? When the supposed comrades catch us into nets of deceit and finally murder, and we have no choice but to leave or join in the corruption of violence and Sartrean bad faith – as wondrously shown, say, in Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook*, here discussed at illuminating length (cf. C 130 and in general 125-35), and of course in many other writings by ex-communists, ranging from hateful to judicious?

A crucial warning here comes from Right-wing “populist” movements, best articulated in Italian Fascism and German Nazism, so that Dean’s ecumenic net rightly caught the Italian use of *camerata* and the German *Kamerad* (C 68-69), both of military origin and massified in World War 1, for fascist comradeship. No doubt, the leaders successfully opposed them to communist movements, but there was much osmosis in the basis as well as in some symbolic and organisational usages (street marching, uniform dressing, youth and women’s wings, etc.). We should remember that the majority of the original fascist party members and then voters were largely plebeians, who (wrongly) believed theirs was a way toward social justice. True, this was stolen goods -- as evident in the perhaps best known use of *Kamerad* in the *Horst-Wessel Lied*, the Nazi Party anthem, whose beautiful tune was stolen from folk music, and the basis demands were bloodily discarded after Hitler came to power in his 1934 massacre of the SA units, but the possibilities of misused yearnings for solidarity must remain important for us.

From such experiences we should learn that messianic confidence in the revolution and the party, together with the consubstantial comradeship, is by itself insufficient and can turn pernicious. As Ernst Bloch once phrased it: behind the *citoyen* came the bourgeois; god help us, who is coming behind the comrade? In all so-called communist Party-States the answer was, alas: the violent oligarch. All realist politics must come to terms with a vanguard, yet comradely politics are destroyed by an elite that does not wish nor believe the main force could ever re-join the vanguard. Elitism (a professional Church, Army, political or financial caste) is the necessary ideology of every ruling class — today, of all capitalist power-holders. In socialist and communist parties it has always been the sign of a most dangerous anti-democratic and hierarchical degeneration, whose perfect form is seen in Stalinism. That this was not confined to “backward” Russia but spontaneously reproduced in all militant Left movements as a tempting and recurring “hard” deviation, may be seen in the Paris Commune, in Marge Piercy’s brilliant *Dance the Eagle To Sleep* that extrapolates from the US revolutionary student movement in the 1960s, in K. S. Robinson’s “Mars” Trilogy that does the same job for the US “rainbow” 80s, as well as in some of Dean’s accounts.

My question is: Why should we downgrade the personal choice and conviction that made us wish to be and led us to become comrades? Why plump for either collective or personal – as Molly in Lessing’s novel does (C 134) -- rather than for a fertile feedback between them? Dean is very aware of this feedback in her case stories, mentioned in my coda, but she doesn’t quite theorize it. Yet for a proper one, we obviously need safeguards also for the non-propertarian (Ursula Le Guin’s term in her peak novel *The Dispossessed*) and potentially creative personality. That is, we need Lenin’s original trinity of “unity in action, free discussion, and criticism” (C 86), with wide-ranging autonomy of local and regional organizations, and we need to refuse its perversion into a will imposed from leadership to members and a disregard of elementary solidarity with co-fighters. A party arrogating to itself freedom from alienation and reification, while its political basis is supposed to be more or less permeated by them and needing the wiser and purer leadership, leads in the long run to a Church. The richer a society is articulated, the more self-defeating this arrogation becomes (see more in my “Archeologies”).

I would plead here for a distinction adumbrated by Dean’s one between “true and false enthusiasm” (C 94): learning from history, we ought to envisage a polar opposition and tension between, say, official and dialectical comradeship. The former is tied to the party as institution, probably with the need for a stern Father, certainly enmeshed with career opportunities and usually with the State’s repressive power, the latter is tied to personal conviction recognizing the overriding need for institutions and leadership in the heat of very hard battles, which are nonetheless insufficient and subject to most perilous degeneration. The institution’s necessity for operative certainties easily slips into “iron” or indeed “steely” ones, where joy in working (that Lenin movingly foregrounds in the article devoted to voluntary communist work, C 134) is officially presupposed rather than fostered.

The crucial nexus is here, not too far from Mao's "contradiction within the people," one between a consensually leading communist party and radical participatory democracy. Beyond the comradely years of armed fighting, the post-revolutionary Gramscian hegemony should exist in permanent cultural and pragmatic osmosis and mutual respect with the classes in whose interest it is supposed to rule; alas, we have some extremely important pointers towards this ideal but no durable historical example of it. Only a strong associative democracy, the original idea of the Soviets or councils, can undergird and demand an openness like that of the Bolshevik party between 1917 and 1921, with real currents, competing programs, and democracy from below -- as Lucio Magri put it: "a responsible pluralism and not rigid fractions."^{3/} Otherwise, all drives toward true or dialectical party comradeship might well founder, as pithily encapsulated by Moshe Levin: "The use of the term 'comrade' loses its magic if the 'comrade' is a superior who issues orders and determines your salary and promotion prospects..." (C 124).

This mightily underscores the need for and role of cognition, understanding, and explanation. Dean mentions it in her generous nod to Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, which we must admit to our common heritage (just like his *Animal Farm*); his quote runs: "'revolutionary' discipline depends on political consciousness -- on an understanding of why order must be obeyed" (C 87). I don't see how such understanding, a partial but widening fusion of general theory with necessarily particular practice, can be subsumed under either discipline, joy, enthusiasm or courage. That is why Gramsci argued in favour of a unifying political centre based on the consciousness needed for durable radical activity, and at the end wondrously claimed that such an ideal party must also be a collective intellectual (which does not at all consist only of those that sociologists call intellectuals). Finally, perhaps the strongest argument for a communist party and its articulated consciousness is Bensaïd's: "Capital itself is the great unifier which subordinates every aspect of social production and reproduction, remodelling the function of the family, determining the social division of labour, and submitting humanity's conditions of social reproduction to the law of value. If that is indeed the case, a party, and not simply the sum of social movements, is the best agent of conscious unification."^{4/}

So let me fearlessly say that I cannot conceive of a plebeian democracy, vanguard party or full comradeship without the soft stubbornness and fertile sternness of enlightening reason, always necessarily twinned with emotion, and we may need to have five instead of four substantial characteristics for "comrade."

Concluding this part, how can we imagine roles for a comradely party as the catalyser, steward, and concentrator of autonomous plebeian political projects? We might start by envisaging models of an updated party, however shifting and overlapping. Let me mention a few.^{5/}

The first would be Trotsky's model of the revolutionary party as a piston in the steam-engine cylinder: it draws wondrous results from concentrating mass energies otherwise vainly dispersed, "but nevertheless, what moves things is not the piston or the cylinder but the steam." This pleasantly materialist image and moral is by now too rigidly confining and paleotechnic. We'd need to transfer it to something like the crucial software in an operating system.

Second come the various possibilities enumerated by Tony Cliff: the party as foreman, as teacher, or companion in struggle. The foreman or more usually the officer vs. soldier model -- Terry Eagleton provides the variant of a rescue team in a mining disaster -- is a strategy to be strictly reserved for actions in an immediate life-or-death situation; as a whole it is to be rejected. The teacher is a needful aspect: we must suppose, as in Plato's *Meno*, that every slave has an inbuilt capacity for rudiments of geometry, if only they are properly drawn out of her. But this model is acceptable only if it simultaneously contains (as every good teacher does) the learner from his pupils, and it is not exhaustive. The companion/s in struggle entrusted at the moment with coordinating and executive functions, such

as *a strike committee* or *shop steward*, who must maintain a constant dialogue with his worker-striker classmates or fail, is a very good initial model.

But my favourite is Brecht's model in his *Me Ti*, which I shall retell in an abbreviated way:

Two men lived together. One slept in a comfortable bed, the younger one on a leather mattress. The elder roused the younger one very early, even when he was sleepy. Often he forbade the youngster the most appetizing food; for drink the young man was given only water or milk, and when he secretly got some alcohol, he was sharply and publicly rebuked. Last morning I saw the elder one on a horse driving the younger one forward. So I asked him about his servant. "He's not my servant," he answered, startled. "He's a sports champion whom I'm training for his greatest match. He hired me to make him fit. I am the servant."

Brecht's moral is: When judging who's the master and who the servant, look at who profits most from the relationship. Thus, the *trainer model* -- where actually nobody is a servant -- seems to me so far the most persuasive: more active than the shop steward, he can also be fired; his role is a limited one for an overriding purpose. Just like the Roman *dictator*, who after winning a war went back to ploughing.

3. Coda: Finally and crucially, how does *Comrade* read? What writer do we readers perceive here, as a determinant for our liking or disliking, understanding or misunderstanding? It is one that practices what she preaches in her compositional and narrative method. It is not a linear argument either as a whole or within each chapter but a collage or "epic" in the joyful sense of Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* or early Brecht: one damn persuasive thing after another. True, she uses a poli-sci frame, a lingo I don't always enjoy, but it is chockfull with little stories and mini-arguments, culminating in sympathetic and abundant case studies -- my favourites might be the stories of some 1930s' women in CP USA such as Mary Inman (C 28-33), also of Frank Wilderson, Harry Haywood, Cyril Briggs, and other Black communists (37-52), and the little jewel of the sinning but also sinned against Finnish worker August Yokinen (C 104-12). The episodes are unified first by their goal, tending towards the same normative center -- the comrade as a type and comradeship as a virtue -- and second by their stance and tone, which seems to me a yin-and-yang fusion of hardboiled realism (penchant for discipline and courage) and emotional romanticism (penchant for enthusiasm and joy).

Dean's preachment is in the lineage and tradition of Rabbi Jehoshua, possibly influenced by her Southern Baptist upbringing, but in lieu of his parables she uses vivid personalized *exempla*. It is driven by disgust at the system's inhuman indignities and a noble obsession with emancipation in all directions. In our disenchanted times her prose is spirally incremental, as befits a concept and stance just being developed, cleansed, and tested for use. It's not a Rationalist clear pane of glass nor a religious glimpse as through a glass darkly, but a piece of work from a comrade for other comrades. From where I as a European stand it's very American (US) in some stances but not in scope, which is generously ecumenic, so that she may be at her best when she deals with the great Russian utopian writers -- I use the term as high praise! -- V.I. Lenin, the democratic organizer, and Andrei Platonov, the looker from plebeian depths (C 53-57); I much regret I cannot write another review only about how she treats these two. Her final moral may be: "[C]omradeship is not risk-free. It is not a magical solution to all problems.... But it is the only form through which these problems might be solved." (C 135)

Jodi Dean's *Comrade* is a generous, angry, and joyous "essay on political belonging." Many will love it, but even those who might hate its horizon will be educated. Go and read it!

Notes

1/ Dean's *Comrade* is cited as C with the page number.

2/ Dean, "Communicative Capitalism," *Cultural Politics* 1 (2005): 51-74.

3/ Post-revolutionary situations are obviously not a pressing problem today, but our ideal horizon present in every action is. Thus, to speak today about a plebeian democracy in tension with the necessary institutions or about a mostly persuasive hegemony seems to me in order. Much more on Gramsci can be found in my "Communism Can Only Be Radical Plebeian Democracy," on Magri in "The Prescience of Lucio Magri," and on the general argument and Badiou's approach (minus his refusal of the party) in my "From the Archeology of Marxism and Communism," to which I refer for all bibliographic data. Further arguments were developed in my books *Splendour, Misery, and Possibilities: An X-ray of Socialist Yugoslavia* (Brill 2016 and Haymarket P 2017) and *Lessons from the Russian Revolution and Its Fallout* (Rosa Luxemburg Foundation Southeast Europe 2017), as well as a number of other essays such as "What Is To Be Done"; the data can be found in my vita and the papers on the site <https://independent.academia.edu/DarkoSuvini>

4/ Daniel Bensaïd, "Leninism in the 21st Century," www.marxists.org/archive/bensaïd/2001/11/leninism.htm

5/ Such roles are discussed in another context in my "Archeology" (see note 3) with full references.

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