

Crowds and Party

by Jody Dean

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By Onur Acaroglu

Jodi Dean's book *Crowds and Party* is poised to ruffle some feathers among theoreticians and activists on the left who seek a mode of doing politics in ways that downplay or denounce the apparatus of the party and the vocabulary of collective emancipation. Dean sets out to 'intervene' politically - in a way akin to the party that calls for a degree of discipline and clear delineation of short- and mid-term goals - into the current state of affairs marked by haphazard challenges to the existing order. Dean's prose is, however, free of the counterproductive, worn-out jargon of consciousness-raising and party-building that often features among groups with missionary pretensions. Instead, Dean's analysis departs from the challenges and exigencies that she has observed within social-movements, providing a distinct angle into the debate and revealing how political strategy can imaginatively draw from a variety of unexplored fields.

The underlying problematic of Dean's discussions is what she perceives as an excessive and misplaced commitment to individuality, a corollary of the dominant ideology that should be staved off of left politics. Dean demonstrates that the individual-form does not have an inherently emancipatory potential with the example of the historical individualisation of the commodity form in the slave trade (2016: 76). Furthermore, individuality is invoked as a selling point: viral marketing campaigns, such as 'custom' Coke cans with individual names, preserve the ubiquity of the brand while vesting it in a 'unique' veneer (ibid.: 23).

The more troubling aspect of individualism is the resonance it finds in leftist political practice. The social upheavals of the last decades rejected clearly delineated leadership procedures and concerted action, not to mention the notion a common and actionable programme. By agreeing to operate within the individualistic terrain underlying the current form of capitalism, Dean argues, leftists lose sight of individualism as a social pathology that idolizes those who do 'whatever it takes' to achieve what ultimately amounts to a precarious livelihood (ibid.: 29).

Dean goes further in arguing that the individual form is an ideological construct conceptualized as the basic unit of subjectivity, drawing on Althusser's formulation that ideology interpellates the individual as the

subject. For Althusser, ideology summons individuals to 'subjectify' themselves in the name of the Subject: as a citizen, national, believer, and so on (Althusser, 1971: 11). Dean proposes an inversion: the subject is interpellated as an individual (Dean, 2016: 44). Thus subjectivity is untethered from the confines of the individual, the ontology of which is problematized. This move allows for a formulation of subjectivity that is not reduced to the level of the individual while reinstating collective subjectivity and consciousness against conservative portraits of 'the crowd' as an irrational mob (ibid.: 11).

This inversion also has the consequence of assuming that a sort of subjectivity pre-exists the individual, in an essentialist vein that goes against the premises set out earlier. This does not inherently compromise Dean's argument, yet it would be more theoretically coherent to connect the internal fragmentation of the individual at a psychological level with the antagonism between capital and labour, invoking the problem of individuality in Marx. It might be objected that a theory of individuality as such is absent in Marx. However, it is pertinent that in *The German Ideology* he differentiates between personal and class individuality, between the individual as a person and what is 'determined by some branch of labour and the conditions pertaining to it' (Marx, 1998: 87). This observation anticipates the fragmented nature of the individual in capitalist society - one that is alienated and opaque even to herself. It is at this point, to supplement one of the central concerns raised by Dean, that the party (or association, commune, society, etc.) is useful as a wedge within the flow of capitalist relations, and a space of autonomy that binds individual vantage points to enable a transcendent collective vision.

Regarding ideological obstacles to emancipation, Dean is categorical that the left needs an avowedly *communist* organization, as this is the only concept uncompromisingly intransigent to capitalism. On this point, Dean is correct to make the call to unfurl the banners of a new positive revolutionary project, however, she does not adequately appreciate that in many parts of the Majority World individual liberties have a progressive connotation. Thus while communists must take pains to underline their differences with bourgeois elements, they find themselves compelled to engage with the institutions of the status quo along these lines precisely in order to hold open and expand a gap for a collective, emancipatory discharge. It would, therefore, have been prudent to take greater account of regionally differential manifestations of class struggle.

To conclude, Dean's book makes a timely contribution to ongoing debates regarding the contemporary relevance of the party-form, in a way that does not repeat partisan accounts of self-evident revolutionary potential and self-referential vanguards. Dean's case for a communist party is

compelling in that it draws from a wide array of theoretical fields, weaving together anecdotes from previous experiences, the epistemic gains of Althusserian interpellation, and processes of capitalist individuation. It maintains a sense of political urgency throughout, suggests novel ways to take spontaneous upheavals to their desired conclusions, and is an indispensable source for anyone who wishes to explore the advantages of the party-form.

Onur Acaroglu completed an MA in Social and Political Thought at the University of Sussex in 2015, focusing on leftwing strategy across Leninist and Autonomist currents. He is currently undertaking a Ph.D. at the University of Birmingham, where he works on the concept of transition.

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