

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Thirteen, Number Three

The Idea of the Party

Marc James Léger*, Independent Scholar, Canada

Abstract: Recent scholarship on the idea of communism leads to questions of organization and what Michel Hardt refers to as “the problem of leadership”. Beyond the critical assessment of the crises of contemporary capitalism, and beyond the existing social democratic solutions, a psychoanalytically-informed Žižekian notion of the party offers solutions to ultra-left theories of networked horizontalism as well as versions of the party that repeat the problems of communist modernism. If the context of climate change, economic inequality and political authoritarianism require that we reconsider “what is to be done” about global neoliberal capitalism, then the idea of the political party, understood in terms of Jacques Lacan’s Discourse of the Analyst, can provisionally occupy the place of the neutral knowledge of the objective demands of history that is premised on the experiences of the emancipatory left. Like the Analyst, the party does not stand in for or represent the people. However, through the fetishistic aspect of representation, as opposed to materially or ontologically-grounded guarantees for political power, the party registers a minimal difference from a technocratic University Discourse and an ultra-left Discourse of the Hysteric.

Keywords: Political Parties, Communism, Slavoj Žižek, Jacques Lacan, Four Discourses

*Author of several books, including *Brave New Avant Garde* (2012), *The Neoliberal Undead* (2013), *Drive in Cinema* (2015), *Don’t Network* (2018) and *Vanguardia* (2019). He is editor of the two volumes of *The Idea of the Avant Garde – And What It Means Today* (2014, 2019)

A radical strategy of emancipation today proposes democracy from below, as is now the zeitgeist with new social movements and activist protest. Along with horizontalist and autonomous politics comes the critique of political representation. Such post-politics is not only popular with ultra-leftists but also with academics and neoliberals. As Tiqqun puts it, today's "cybernetic" social systems seek to do away with socialism and now include the direct and participatory democracy of citizens' movements, which replaces political programme, class struggle and the critique of political economy with ecology and economic democracy (Tiqqun, 2020). If today's left wishes to resist pragmatic compromise with bourgeois ideology, however, we must find a means to overcome the false choice between old left communist parties and the new forms of networked horizontalism. A different kind of communism is possible. The "idea of communism" that has been discussed in the last decade by various left intellectuals, must, of necessity, find some form of organizational expression beyond populism and beyond the neoliberal bipartisan endgame, leading some scholars to rethink the idea of the party, which we could otherwise refer to as the questions of leadership on the left (Hardt, 2015; Frank, 2016; Gautney, 2018; Sunkara, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2017; Mouffe, 2018). Three options present themselves to us: critique through an objective analysis of the conditions that prevail, hierarchical party organization and dispersed leftist disruption. To the extent that the latter is deemed ineffective, the idea of the party implies not only the experiences of twentieth-century state communism, but also a consideration of how it is that the concept of the party survives because of what Slavoj Žižek refers to as the "spectral features" of the idea, its irreducibility not only to historical experience, but to its own notion (Žižek, 2017b: lv).

These three options for leftist praxis – political economy, leftist horizontalism and communist party form – can be problematized through the development of a Žižekian-Lacanian approach to the communist party. The notion that ideological belief is interpassive – I believe something because others believe it – subtends the argument that communist parties are best explained in terms of Jacques Lacan's theory of the Discourse of the Analyst and that political vanguards, which may or may not take a party form, are characterized by the Discourse of the Master (Lacan, 1978; Lacan, 2007; Žižek, 2002;

Žižek, 2014a). Because the Master is a stage in the passage to the Analyst, the two are inherent to any psychoanalytically-informed notion of communist organization. Žižek's theory of the party as Analyst suggests that such a political organization can provisionally occupy the place of a neutral knowledge of the objective demands of history, for instance, by prioritizing the socialization of capitalist surplus, the democratization of politics and labour relations, ecology and demilitarization. The reference to objective conditions and to an overdetermined social totality is what distinguishes Lenin, who allowed for improvisation with regard to circumstances, and Stalin, who sought to fuse orthodoxy with arbitrary and irrational opportunism, ignoring objective conditions and producing secrecy as the Real of historical reality (Žižek, 2017b: 176-82). A new party organization cannot be the big Other as such, nor an all-powerful and all-knowing Master, but is an organization whose task it is to respond to the issues of the day and lead society in the direction of a communist overcoming of capitalist social relations. Like the Analyst, the party does not stand in for or represent the people. However, through its leadership, the party registers a minimal difference from the technocratic Discourse of the University, which does not believe that capitalism is an effective system of social reproduction, but cynically insists on it all the same. It is also different from an anti-capitalist Discourse of the Hysteric that repudiates the conditions that prevail but without challenging the capitalist system (Žižek, 2017a: 208; Hamza and Ruda, 2017).

The principal weapon of the party vanguard is knowledge of revolutionary theory and history. Politics cannot be a matter of asserting an identity. In this sense communism propose a short-circuit between interestedness and disinterestedness, a paradoxical ideological neutrality through which one can evaluate questions of truth. Although he rejects all politics that are based on state power, and therefore the form of the communist party, Alain Badiou contends that today's communism is not at all unconcerned with the fate of the party. On the contrary, he argues, in the 1960s in France it was essential for radicals to take a position towards the French Communist Party, the CGT labour union and the Algerian War, an inquiry that was later followed by the critique by Maoist intellectuals and workers of PCF revisionism and then by the creation of autonomous organizations. In the 1970s and afterwards, the political capitulation of the *nouveaux*

philosophes brought a premature end to the question of communism and in their wake have come the “inhabitants of the immanent ‘multitudes’ of ‘Empire’” (Badiou, 2006: xxxv). The problem that confronts the left today is for Badiou a matter of reconstruction that cannot be limited to anti-capitalist protest. What, then, after the reduction of twentieth-century communist parties to “actually existing” state socialism, are the prospects for the idea of communism and its organization?

The Situation and the Paradox of Organization

The problem of the left is not simply a problem for political organizations, but for all who suffer and resist the depredations of global capitalism. The question of political organization, of “what is to be done and who is going to do it,” begins with the analysis of what, exactly, is happening in the global economy (Harvey, 2010). The sociologist Wolfgang Streeck argues that the crisis symptoms of global capitalism involve three mutually reinforcing long-term trends: the decline in economic growth in capitalist countries, the increase of wealth inequality, and the rise of household, industrial and government debt (Streeck, 2014: 35). The resulting political problem, for Streeck, is that capitalism no longer requires democracy and no longer seeks the consent of the working class. What David Harvey refers to as “accumulation by dispossession” has replaced the postwar consensus based on Keynesian redistribution. Even if people are interested in politics, neoliberal governance is beyond citizen control.

Given the disastrous conditions that prevail, Streeck believes that we should prepare for the end of capitalism, but without pretending to know what will replace it. According to him, there is no political force that is able to reverse the disintegration, uncertainty and obscurity of capitalist decline (Streeck, 2014: 47). The left can neither defeat capitalism through party politics nor rescue capitalism through local self-determination. The absence of an organized left unexpectedly contributes to the decline of capitalism by freeing it from such countervailing powers as labour laws, environmental regulation and financial regulations that in the twentieth century mitigated its destructive tendencies. Capitalism becomes its own worst enemy.

Beyond Streeck's bleak vision, the left nevertheless has several programmes for preventing further stagnation and inequality. Managing the transition to a zero growth economy, according to Harvey, implies either socialism or communism and the end of capitalism as we know it. Since the neoliberal solutions to the 1970s economic crisis (automation, wage repression, global competition, third-worldization of markets, debt financing, market bubbles), along with their ideological attributes (free markets, free trade, entrepreneurialism), are no longer tenable, any alternative would imply re-connecting surplus capital and surplus labour so that capitalism is not saved at the expense of economic, social, cultural, political and environmental welfare (Harvey, 2009).

Harvey notes the tendency of the anti-globalization left to reject any return to state communism. The "communist hypothesis," as Badiou calls it, takes the form today of horizontally networked organizations that avoid state control and that represent a convergence of Marxist and anarchist traditions that hark back to the 1860s in Europe (Harvey, 2009; Badiou, 2010). The situation and the question of organization are co-implicated. As anti-capitalist movements emerge worldwide, Harvey argues, they will require a solution to the mutually enforcing "double blockage" of not only who will be the agent of change, but of what needs to be done. In other words, beyond Streeck, a situation involves not only systemic processes but also questions of praxis. The limits to endless capital accumulation and growth imply that revolutionary politics must negate the capitalist system of monetization as the motor of human history. This implies an awareness of the interconnection of seven fields of analysis: 1) the technological and organizational forms of production, exchange and consumption, 2) relations to nature, 3) social relations between people, 4) symbolic and mental conceptions of the world, 5) geographical and labor processes, goods and services, 6) institutional, legal and governmental arrangements, and 7) the everyday life of social reproduction. "The first rule for a global anti-capitalist movement," Harvey says, "must be [to] never rely on the unfolding dynamic of one moment without carefully calibrating how relations with all the others are adapting and reverberating" (Harvey, 2009). This means that anti-capitalist movements must seek alliances among people in different sectors rather than purity

around specific issues or areas of expertise. The emphasis should be on self-realization and equality in social relations, respect for nature, common interest, self-management in labour processes, technology and organization oriented to serving the public interest rather than corporate and government control. For Marxists, Harvey adds, the ideas and ideology of the ruling class must be replaced with revolutionary theory and radical currents of thought. This implies challenging the narrowing of radical theory within academia to identity politics as well as the technocratic systems of thought that prevail in business and economics, in the actually existing knowledge industries and in the mass media.

Harvey makes the important point that radical change cannot take place peacefully, voluntarily and without active struggle. The left is fragmented by sectarianism: NGOs that are pragmatic, reformist and ameliorist at best; self-organizing autonomist tendencies that prefer horizontal networking and solidarity economies; and a third option of traditional labour organizations and leftist political parties, which are willing to negotiate state power but whose social welfarism and proletarian vanguardism are now in question. If one is serious about a communist transition, however, Harvey insists that one cannot avoid the seizure of state power and the transformation of its existing legal and institutional structures. The international regulation of trade and money, he says, is beyond the purview of local social movements (Harvey, 2009). As Sam Gindin argues, states establish and enforce the rules of globalization and manage the crises of market relations. Rather than protesting capitalism, he says, we must transform state institutions at municipal, regional and national levels so that we can democratize the economy and everyday life (Gindin, 2014).

In more abstract and possibly simpler terms, Erik Olin Wright suggests that the economic ecology, if we are speaking of anti-capitalism, is distinguished between three forms of power: economic power, state power and social power (Wright, 2016). Different modes of production allow for ecosystemic variations on which of these forms of power determine the production process. Socialism proposes the collectively organized exercise of social power in order to determine the ways in which surplus is organized. Wright

argues against a revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and favours instead its gradual replacement. A system-level rupture today would not, he says, create favourable conditions for alternative economies but would more likely lead to long-term economic decline, resulting in popular opposition and political repression. State mechanisms must be used to create alternative economic relations that gradually eliminate the dominance of capitalism. In the next decades, the climate challenge and automation will require a transition away from neoliberal policy and greater state responsibility for maintaining standards of living, creating conditions for socialist relations. None of this can be achieved, however, without political struggle and mobilization.

In the context of protracted neoliberal crisis, citizen protest has made it more difficult to see that what we are dealing with is not simply a crisis of leadership, but a crisis of capitalism. Any prospect for communism must address the question of organization, which, for Badiou, lies at the intersection of an idea and an event (Badiou, 2012: 63; Badiou, 2013). The growing tendency of the state is to manage crises through greater military and police repression, control of communications media and security measures against any form of autonomous political organization. For Joshua Clover, the politics of fighting capitalism through labour struggles has been replaced by forms of riot against the police state. Clover's use of a Marxist standpoint to argue that changed material conditions make for the historical inevitability of anarchist riots provides a deterministic gloss on an otherwise divided left that has more than perturbation in its repertoire of tactics and strategies (Clover, 2016). For Badiou, the contradiction between the masses and the state cannot be resolved by an emphasis on material conditions. The logic of scission implies change and necessitates something new in the situation. The organization of politics does not close the gap between base and superstructure, but thinks politics as disjoined from History. As Bruno Bosteels puts it, vanguard experiments are wagers on the new rather than the primacy of violent acts (Bosteels, 2011: 6). Badiou's theory of communism challenges the kind of political philosophy that defines politics as an instance of the situation and instead brings philosophy and theory to bear on politics (Bosteels, 2011: 14).

Despite their differences, Badiou's approach to political organization is not so far off from Žižek's argument that to think the political means for the party to think and also for the notion of the party as thought itself (Žižek, 2006: 67-93). Whereas the autonomist Marxist notion of the multitude seeks to locate politics in the process of production, the party mediates the abstract universality of the multitude and its negation. The idea of communism is therefore an internationalist vision that looks beyond the bourgeois state and beyond the differences among citizens. The communist party does not directly serve the people; the communist party leads the struggle against capitalism.

In keeping with Badiou's critique of democratic materialism, the communist party has no substantive community and no base as either its point of reference or its telos. Not even the current ecological crisis gives the party its *raison d'état*. The party thus mediates between the proletariat, or those forces that struggle to actualize the idea of communism, and the empirical population. In any actually existing communism the concept of democracy is recast as the struggle between the correct political tendencies and the reactive tendencies that cause the masses to betray their own interests. This distinguishes communism from the post-political hysteria that serves mostly to mask its own failure to affect political change. As Žižek claims, the liberal expression of shock and outrage about the triumph of the right in Europe and elsewhere is a feigned naiveté. The rise of Donald Trump in the U.S., Nigel Farage in the U.K. and Marine Le Pen in France is due to the decline of the left and the hegemony of neoliberalism (Žižek, 2014b).

A communist party mediates the mitigation of narrow interests while also negating the fantasy that the party apparatus can immediately meet the demands of a regulated utopia. The function of a communist party organization must therefore remain, as Marx described it, the organization of the disappearance of the party. Class struggle not only dissolves class relations, but the field of politics itself (Žižek 2006: 82). If parties are to mediate the organizational politics of the living labour that embodies the contradiction between capital and labour, we must avoid the false choice between horizontality and hierarchy. The militant political organization is the deciding factor in the conflict between the dispersed plurality of social struggles and the destructive tendencies of

capitalism. The following describes three different perspectives on the communist party, beginning with what orthodoxy considers a leftist deviation, then a rightist deviation, followed by a dialectical revolutionary humanism that takes up the best elements of both.

Precarious Communism

As an instance of left communism, Richard Gilman-Opalsky has put forward the notion of “precarious communism,” which he defines as an autonomist détournement and critical redeployment of the *Communist Manifesto* in an era for which revolution demands a multiplicity of connections in a revisable and evolving politics (Gilman-Opalsky, 2014: 3). Gilman-Opalsky takes it as given that today’s radicals do not call for the creation of parties but rather put forward new communist desires beyond sovereignty and beyond certainty in theory and practice. Such “precarious communism” is honest about its history and is consequently less ideological and orthodox. It does not propose to change the world, but looks for new ways of being-in-the-world that are differentially developed within the context of revolts. Gilman-Opalsky is therefore concerned that this be a new experiment and not a repetition of the communisms that have already been attempted. His approach acknowledges rather than ignores the kinds of critiques that emerged in the 1960s. Since this period, the politics of autonomy have addressed the ways that capitalism expropriates people from their brains and bodies in a 24/7 information economy that seeks “total access to the conscious energies of everyday people” (Opalsky, 2014: 23). The existing state of being-in-the-world has combined subjectivity with technology in a capitalist “technontology” (Opalsky, 2014: 28). For him, the fact that our social and technological capacities have not been developed in a communist way does not prevent a class critique of neoliberalism, which sets the precarious in motion through riots and protests.

Precarious communists are minor, a small part of the global precariat whose basis is the commons of association, which incorporates rather than eliminates exchange relations. For Gilman-Opalsky, communism is not a form of government but the free association of independent producers as the best means to destroy alienation. “We are far too uncertain,” he argues, “to try our hand at rearranging *your* life” (Opalsky, 2014: 113).

While he considers that philosophy bridges the gap between anarchism and communism, he takes a page from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to propose the “standpoint of a materiality constituted in the networks of productive cooperation” as a plane of indeterminacy and a becoming-ungovernable:

Precarious communists don't want to run the government. We have been running from or against the government everywhere in various ways for a very long time. And we cannot follow the lead of those fake libertarians who oppose the government, yet do not oppose capitalism, for they haven't noticed the colonization of government by capital, which is largely what has made government so dangerous (Opalsky, 2014: 121-23).

Precarious communists want a rich everyday life of human association, autonomy and dignity. The bourgeois delusion of living according to principles and the gratification of needs should be retained within communism as, strangely enough, “the development of an uncertain movement against capital, toward something more dignified, autonomous, and communist” (Opalsky, 2014: 126). Like Zapatismo and the Gilets Jaunes, a nomadic communism cannot be limited to the nation-state but exceeds every existing political order.

Gilman-Opalsky finds both a critic and a supporter in Fredric Jameson's discussion of the Leninist party. Jameson would fault Gilman-Opalsky's vision for repressing the question of the party according to the belief that a new conjuncture inevitably requires a new idea of political organization (Jameson, 2009: 292). The suspicion and rejection of party politics is more or less the tendency among today's new social movement activists. What philosophy can do for both communists and anarchists, according to Jameson, is defend the postwar achievements of social democracy and the welfare state, not because they can succeed against state capitalism, but because their failure is part of the pedagogy of the masses, a lesson about the system and about how revolution is an impossible “delinking” from the shackles of political thinking (Jameson, 2009: 299-301).

Communist Desire

Mark Fisher has defined “capitalist realism” as the belief that not only is capitalism inevitable but that it is not even possible to imagine an alternative to it (Fisher, 2009). In response to this, Jodi Dean has proposed the existence of a “leftist realism” according to which not only is capitalism considered the best means to secure the interests of the radical democratic multitude, but that it is consequently no longer possible to imagine revolutionary collectivism (Dean, 2016: 54-5). By proposing a return to communist collectivism as a means to fight the global capitalist system of exploitation, Dean has made a strong case for the party form, going against some of the postulates of Badiou and Žižek, as well as Jacques Rancière, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. In two of her books, *The Communist Horizon* and *Crowds and Party*, Dean has put forward arguments that are essential to any theory of the communist party today, least of all the need for an organizational answer to pressing social and ecological problems. Her most recent work relies on the category of the people, or the crowd, as a basis for a theory of the party. In contrast to Gilman-Opalski’s ultra-leftist work, Dean’s crowd-based theory of the communist party could be thought of as an instance of rightist deviation.

In *The Communist Horizon*, Dean argues that today’s left has lost sight of the communist horizon, which she defines as “a discourse and a vocabulary for the expression of universal, egalitarian, and revolutionary ideals” (Dean, 2012: 8). There are many points in Dean’s book that are valid for any theory of the communist party, including the notion that the left should critique and reject the emphasis on consumer choice and aesthetic self-fashioning, micropolitics and identity politics, as well as the notion that sharing, affectivity and creativity are instances of productivity beyond capitalism. The left should indeed reassert solidarity and a collective “we” in the shift towards a militant opposition to capitalism. Dean is correct to state that the alterglobal left’s anti-representational rejection of a common political line or programme is a post-politics that replaces class struggle and disperses energies in favour of inclusion and participation.

Dean’s party is a flexible and adaptive form, accountable to the people, and is not an instrument through which communists carry out the iron laws of History (Dean, 2012: 20;

Lawless, 2016). Nor is the party form discredited by the invocation of historical evidence of its failures and fiascos – from Stalinism and the Gulag to Chinese neoliberalism – which conflates history with politics (Dean, 2012: 32). Against the liberal ideology of democratic equality and inclusion, society is not reducible to a fully transparent and metaphysical immanentism (Dean 2012: 104, 113-14; Dean, 2009). This insight extends to assemblage theory and various contenders for critical theory in contemporary intellectual debates on not only the status of the subject, but also theories of what constitutes politics. Wendy Brown’s idea that identity politics, discourse theory and postmodernism have displaced orthodox Marxism and that this displacement is the unconscious source of “left melancholia” and incapacity, can be referred not only to the passing of a Marxist “ideal ego” (how the left sees itself) but also to a Marxist “ego ideal” (how the left is perceived by others) wherein post-structuralism represents only one of the two deaths of the left: first as Stalinist fiasco, second as postmodernism, as it were. The passing of epochs makes it such that the critique of capital and the class project must not be abandoned but redefined, with communism as the name, or Master Signifier, of the commitment to egalitarianism. Postmodernism’s refusal of a communist meta-politics and its alternative valorization of local struggles and single issues has secured the inevitability of capitalism (Dean, 2012: 174). Dean proposes that psychoanalysis is helpful to the critique of the left’s abandonment of revolutionary ideals.

Given the Lacanian framing of her theory, and with regard to a Žižekian approach to the party as Analyst, there are aspects of Dean’s work that are not essential to a theory of the party, beginning with her assertion that the party is premised on the sovereignty of the people. In Dean’s estimation, the people are communism’s political and economic cause, and she rightly states that not all mass and popular revolts are communist in nature (Dean, 2012: 186). While we should blame capitalist crises on capitalism, and not the demands of the people, however feasible or not, and while the people are increasingly demanding socialist alternatives to the failures of the corporate state, Dean’s notion of “the people as the rest of us,” which she presents as an alternative to the Hardt and Negri concept of the multitude, tends to diminish the Marxian analysis of proletarianization on

a global scale and to assert the particularities of a post-Fordist context like the United States (Dean, 2012: 75; Smith, 2016).

It is not necessary to avoid the notion of the proletariat in favour of “the people,” even if the latter term is cannily defined by Dean as a non-empirical, non-substantive, non-positive, divided and divisive force (Dean, 2012: 80). Communism de-ontologizes class difference and understands it as a contingent historical product. One does not “perform” collectivity, as Dean puts it, which would reduce the tension between labour and capital to questions of normativity and to the binary opposition of individual and collective (Dean, 2012: 12). Although Dean correctly notes that capitalism privileges individual freedom more than democracy, there is no reason to accept the capitalist ideology according to which individual freedom is defined by the non-freedom of exchange relations. Dean tends to make individualism the target of her communist anti-capitalism (Dean, 2012: 42). This contrasts, for example, with the work of Ellen Meiksins Wood, which criticizes capitalist democracy from the point of view of class analysis rather than for its ideology of political liberalism (Meiksins Wood, 1998; Meiksins Wood, 1995). As Dean puts it: “Over thirty years of unbridled capitalism made egoism and individualism the order of the day such that collectivity was already viewed with suspicion” (Dean, 2012: 53-4). And again: “The Right emphasizes the individual, individual survival, individual capacity, individual rights. The Left should be committed to the collective power of the people” (Dean, 2012: 60). Neverminding the fact that National Socialism made the same argument, from a Marxist perspective, communism would bring about the conditions for the realization of individual as well as community prosperity and discovery. Indeed, as Marx puts it, the goal of communism must be the free development of each as compatible with the free development of all. In relation to this, Georg Lukács advanced the concept of reification in relation to the fetish character of commodities, arguing that the rationalization of bureaucratically controlled production had been turned against the individual producer, whose work and needs were alienated, and whose personality was sold on the market (Lukács, 1968: 97-8). In communism, humans return to themselves as social beings and not against themselves for the sake of collectivity. Communism strives to make a place for difference, individualism and particularity that

capitalist competition and exploitation does not (Marx, 1972: 66-125). Capitalism does not sanction individualism per se but rather possessive individualism, inclusive of nationalism and identitarianism, under conditions of conformity and competition.

In *Crowds and Party*, Dean attempts to dispense with the individual form by proposing a twist to the Althusserian drama of ideological interpellation. The “individuality of agency is a fantasy,” she argues, which occludes the material and collective conditions of action (Dean, 2016: 82). The interpellation of subjects as individuals must fail, she argues, because behind the individual subject there is a collective subject. Although Dean acknowledges that a subjective dimension is crucial to the Marxist tradition, her purpose is to redefine the ways in which subjectivity is traversed by solidarity and collectivism. She thus proposes to reverse Louis Althusser’s formula according to which ideology interpellates individuals as subjects by arguing that ideology rather interpellates subjects as individuals. In contrast to Lukács’ reading of the early Marx, Dean argues that to destroy exchange relations is not to emancipate the individual but rather to eliminate the individual form once and for all, which she defines as inherently pathological (Dean, 2016: 57). From a Lacanian perspective, it is not only that subjectivity guarantees ideological failure, which merely inverts Althusser’s idea that subjectivity is what makes ideology work, but that interpellation fails because behind subjectivity there is not collectivity, as Dean argues, but rather void, from which derives both the need for and the inconsistency of social rituals, symbols and structures. Žižek’s discussion of Althusser’s theory of ideological hailing helps us to understand how it is that in Dean’s work the individual has a similar function as does the Jew in anti-Semitism (Žižek, 2016a). The question revolves around the conflict between labour and capital, an antagonism that is projected onto a third element that is used to obfuscate the difference between them and the fact that “there is no ideological relationship.” Although Dean does not believe in an organic order of society and accepts that the people are divided, the individual appears in her work as a fetish that masks the immanence of social antagonism. The individual thus comes to embody this antagonism. No wonder then that she concludes *The Communist Horizon* with the fantasy image of a crowd tearing into an effigy of a “fat cat high net worth individual,” which subtends the promise-threat that a communist party would not

steal our enjoyment but give license to revolutionary terror, entreating us to “smite our enemies” and “take all their possessions,” as we reassure one another that we are “on the right side of history!” (Dean, 2012: 248) This is certainly not a decaffeinated politics that is deprived of its harmful ingredients. The real question though is not how communism eliminates individual subjectivity, but how does it incorporate it as part of an emancipatory universality. Communist anti-individualism is no better than fascist anti-Semitism. The difference between them resides in the logic of class struggle, in which the competing classes are caught in an antagonism that is inherent to the social structure, or mode of global, Fordist as well as post-Fordist, capitalism. Conflict, however, is not the telos of communism and should not be its motivating narrative.

For Althusser, the individual subject of political interpellation is a cipher for the existence of ideology. According to Žižek, Althusser’s drama of police hailing, “hey, you,” to which the subject responds with incredulity and with submission, has a dual structure of disavowal that involves both narrative temporality and timelessness. For Althusser, individuals are first, subjects that are constituted as individuals, and secondly, subjects who deny this as a problem of interpellation. In other words, subjects respond to interpellation with guilt feelings. In Dean’s account, the interpellated subject would respond with the denial that they are what Dean’s collectivity tells them they are: selfish individuals. For Žižek, the timelessness in Althusser’s drama renders invisible a more complex sequence and makes Althusser’s account a kind of show trial on behalf of ideological clarity. The feeling of guilt in this structure is a purely formal and non-pathological kernel of *jouissance* that Žižek argues weighs more heavily on those who have nothing on their conscience. In this sense a good communist, for Dean, would be someone who knows they are guilty of individual selfishness and seeks to correct their ways through collective solidarity. Those who would be most guilty in such a communism would not be those who reject the accusation of individualism, but those who do not understand it. As Lacan would have it, *les non-dupes errent*. For Žižek, the feeling that I am guilty but do not know why is essential to the Lacanian notion of the subject and exists prior to any social determination. This subject is divided between innocence and abstract guilt, which coincide in *all* social mediation. Dean’s version of

this ideological drama makes her into the communist who makes use of ideology to individualize subjects. The castrative anxiety of what I am for the Other is derived from the need to impose political correctness in the class struggle. In order to identify with communist desire at the level of symbolic mandate, the subject would need to be able to eliminate the impenetrable level of pre-ideological interpellation, or pre-ideological *jouissance*. *Crowds and Party* seeks to do away with the problem of subjectivity by transposing it onto theories of the crowd that has fascinated mostly conservative thinkers and that persists in much countercultural as well as post-humanist horizontalism.

The extent to which Dean wishes to define collectivism as against the individual is noticed also in her rejection of Badiou's notion that the truth procedure of communism prescribes a subject of this truth, an individual who actively makes the unselfish decision to become part of a political truth procedure (Dean, 2012: 194). For Dean, in contrast, such a decision must belong to the collective, to the "common action and will of those who have undergone a certain proletarianization or destitution, of those who relinquish their attachment to an imaginary individuality" (Dean, 2012: 195). Whereas Badiou's theory of the subject is consistent with Lacan, Dean's is not. The subject of psychoanalysis does not relinquish their imaginings in favour of symbolic mandates; the unconscious is not and cannot be wholly shifted to the register of collective consciousness. Moreover, from a Freudian point of view, all subjects of language have undergone a certain destitution; and from a Marxist point of view, even capitalists are alienated, even if they are not exploited to the same degree as workers. At many crucial points in her analysis, Dean's post-subject of collective desire is less compatible with Freudo-Marxism than it is with the various anti-humanist paradigms of post-structural and postmodern theory. Wishing to eliminate subjective mediation, Dean has not negated the negation of capitalism, but has rather inverted capitalism in a non-dialectical manner. The matter is not settled by shifting the notion of subject from an individual to that of a concept, as proposed by Hegel, or to a class subject, as in Marx. Communism cannot totalize the field of social existence as a singular plane of immanence, which is why for Badiou there are different orders of truth. In Žižekian terms, there can be no collective determination beyond questions of ideology and alienation.

In addition to Dean's notion of the people as divided, as being marked by a gap (the people as not-all), we should not attempt to positivize this gap. Instead of the structure of people and party that Dean proposes, it would be better to work with the familiar structure of class antagonism, with relations of labour and capital mediated by the communist party. Rather than two competing classes, or in Dean's terms, "the rich and the rest of us," we have the two classes and the party that stands in for universal emancipation (Dean, 2012: 85). A communist party that does not fight capitalism is a communist party in name only (McAdams, 2017). The communist party emphasizes, first of all, capital and capitalist relations; secondly, labour exploitation; and lastly, class struggle – not as a conflict against our individual selves and others, but against class inequality and property relations.

The gap that Dean identifies within the people itself should not be formulated in terms of the impossibility of the people as the basis for communism, but rather in terms of the party as *objet a*, which is *external* to the division of society into different classes (Dean, 2012: 205). In a communist society, people would be *less* alienated in desire, in part because they would live according to real needs that have for the most part been satisfied. Contra Dean, the party does not occupy the gap between the people and itself as government, nor does the party function as a vehicle to maintain the gap of communist desire (Dean, 2012: 207). The party as *objet a* under-determines the symbolic order and does not suture it, which would be the purpose of an authoritarian populism. The party as *objet a* becomes a third element that stands for and precedes the pure difference, or non-relation, between labour and capital. It is not only that the people are divided, but that the party stands in for or represents the impossibility of the people ever constituting an organic whole. This impossibility is not the basis for communism especially. It is not only that the people are incompatible with capitalism, as Dean has it, but that the people are incompatible with communism as well, which is why we need a party (Dean, 2012: 230). It is not enough that the people assert its lack in the fact of proletarianization and exploitation, and then redoubles its lack by alienating it in communist desire. This redoubling of lack is more or less what happens when disillusioned voters switch their

party allegiances and it is what occurred after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The communist party is therefore not the overlapping of two lacks, but stands for the Real-impossible that cuts across and eludes the symbolic order that apportions the distinction between individual and collective. Individual and collective are abstract, mutual opposites; they are not definitional of class struggle. The party registers antagonism as Real rather than as desire alienated in symbolic mandates (Žižek, 2016b). If the party occupies anything it is the function of mediation between the competing interests that are constitutive of society. If division goes all the way down, as Dean says, if it is irreducible, it cannot be the privilege of any one part of the whole, however “dialectically” one wishes to conceive the will of the people towards emancipatory goals (Dean, 2012: 111-12). That is why today, when there are few actually existing communist parties, the people remain, in all their bewildered, disoriented and conflictual relations.

Jodi Dean’s use of the Lacanian notions of desire and drive is perhaps what is most debatable in her theories of communism and capitalism. The concept of Lacanian ethics, according to which one should not give way on one’s desire, does not justify defining communist struggle in terms of desire, and this, against the definition of communicative capitalism as a matter of drive (Dean, 2010; Dean, 2002). As she correctly states, drive amounts to arranging one’s enjoyment by missing its goal, keeping the subject involved in the loop of repetition (Dean, 2012: 65). She writes: “In the contemporary networks of communicative capitalism, drive is a feedback circuit that captures our best energies. Invigorating communism as a political alternative requires amplifying the collective desire that can cut through these affective networks” (Dean, 2012: 67). Dean thus associates desire with communism and drive with networked capitalism and its individualizing effects. Although she is aware of the fact, it is nevertheless the case that psychoanalysis does not and cannot be used to marshal politics in this way (Dean, 2012: 66). By the same token, communism does not and cannot have a privileged relation to either desire or drive since ideology is not reducible to material reality. Although Dean asserts that drive keeps us caught in the circuits of communicative capitalism, producing value for capitalists, it is also the case, psychoanalytically speaking, that only communist drive would allow for a politically left *separation* from our *alienation* in capitalized

communication and spectacle (Fuchs, 2014; Dyer-Witheford, 2015). As Dean herself puts it, “drive and sublimation might be understood more dialectically, that is, not merely as the form of accommodation but also as substantive practices of de- and reattachment, unmaking and making” (Dean, 2012: 177).

Here is another occasion in which Badiou’s theory of the event is helpful in de-linking the universal truth of a generic event from its false substantiation in the situation of capitalist production. The truth of communism is not immanent in the world. If it were we would not have fascism. In Dean’s estimation, it is not the truth of an event that defines the “non-coincidence of communism with its setting,” but communist desire (Dean, 2012: 190). However, no politics can be positivized in or determined by desire, even if one admits that desire is always deferred as the desire of the Other. This is why commodity fetishism functions less in terms of individual desires than in terms of their constant deterritorialization and de-individualization. The same is true for group formations and collectivities. The only way for collective desire to function as a telos would be to accept something like Hardt and Negri’s notion of the immanence of communism within capitalist productivity. On that score, one could dispense with Lacan in favour of Deleuze and Guattari. A revolutionary communism represents a permanent revolution within modernity and not an engineering of desire. In Lacanian terms, the party as Analyst does not involve people in a collective version of ego psychology, or worse, in a Jungian version of the collective unconscious. No wonder then that Dean prefers the notion of division-of-and-in-the-common to that of a dialectics of autonomy and solidarity across struggles. Her notion of the desire of collectivity is of necessity oriented towards, as she puts it, the destruction of the “self-enclosed circuit of drive” (Dean, 2012: 187).

If collectivity was to be built around the lack of desire, it would refer to the party as Analyst, and not the people. Collectivity built around lack, as with the Discourse of the Analyst, would not provide a common desire, but a loss of the Master Signifier of politics itself. As Analyst, the party mediates the division of interests among the people. In this sense, the communist party cannot be defined in terms of fantasy, since such fantasy

would result in the peaceful coexistence of labour and capital. Dean argues that revolution cannot be predicted or pre-determined by a programme since this would remain on the order of an already existing situation. The party, she says, learns the lessons that come from the uprisings of the people and so party politics cannot be limited to problems of state (Dean, 2016: 155). Rather than resolving the contradictions between capital and labour, the party form, for Dean, presumes that the alienation of capital has been overcome through the *jouissance* of the collective as a partisan subject (Dean, 2016: 157). Against this, the inconsistency of the people and of the situation could indeed be said to produce the space for something to emerge but it cannot not determine what that will be. Žižek's slogan that *la révolution ne s'autorise que d'elle même* speaks to the fact that the party, if it is to have a leadership function, must define for itself – and not simply through the people – a course of action. Only in this sense can we speak of revolutionary leadership.

A Self-Authorized Communism

If we are to think of the communist party in terms of the Discourse of the Analyst, we must consider that the party is and is not the means through which the people or the crowd reflect back on themselves. Dean is correct to say that the relation between the party and the working class is a psychic space, but incorrect insofar as the party fulfills the needs of the crowd. On the level of practice, the crowd must go through the experience of hystericization before it can enter into a transference relation with the party as Analyst (Lacan, 2007: 33). By the same token, the party must assert its authority so that it can become the Analyst. The Master, in and of itself, has no practical knowledge, which is why it only opens up a space of possibility. But the masses, in their desperation, do not want to exchange a capitalist Master for a communist Master, which means that a truly vanguard party is irreducible. It is even irreducible to its programme. This is only one reason why the idea of communism is not the same as the idea of the working class. The working-class Hysteric knows that it is valuable to liberal, populist and even rightist politics, and so, although politics is an at times obscure knowledge, the communist party as Analyst possesses knowledge that derives from the political experiences of class struggle.

In terms of the Lacanian structure of the party as Analyst, it is not the people but political knowledge that is in the place of truth. Such knowledge cannot be grasped at the level of a crowd event, nor is it reducible to the institutions of knowledge production, which would give us the structure of the Discourse of the University. Absolute knowing, Lacan would argue, implies the abolition of the crowd's *jouissance* inasmuch as its desire must be interpreted and not simply obeyed (Lacan, 2007: 35). As Lacan puts it: "[t]he intrusion into the political can only be made by recognizing that the only discourse there is, and not just analytic discourse, is the discourse of *jouissance*, at least when one is hoping for the work of truth from it" (Lacan, 2007: 78). Psychoanalysis is thus not simply a matter of communist desire since, as praxis, it is dedicated to knowing truth. Meaning and *jouissance* are inherently incompatible. The party does not wholly possess the truth since, in order to become the Analyst, it must renounce knowledge-*jouissance*. The work of the party thus begins by prohibiting something of the crowd's hysteria. If we are not to become demagogues we must not give way to crowd vitalism (Noys). As Dean herself admits about the crowd: "[i]t doesn't have a politics any more than does an anthill, forest, or heap of stones" (Dean, 2016: 216). At the same time, the party cannot force change on the people against their will. According to Žižek, the fascist or Stalinist leader is a demagogue who manipulates people's desires and pretends to know better than the people what they want (Žižek, 2014a: 46). The party, insofar as it shifts from the position of Master to Analyst, does not have the task of domination but of winning freedom and emancipation for the mass of society through their struggle.

Although the distinction might seem slight, it is important to consider that the vanguard party does not give the people a political direction but rather seeks to alter the existing conditions of social pathology, a condition it has learned about by listening to the people but without directly supporting their desire. As Dean says: "The party doesn't know. It organizes a transference space offering the position of the subject supposed to know" (Dean, 2016: 199). The communist party must resist giving in to the desires of the masses where those desires prevent them from being anything more than exploited. The party understands that the people must exit transference by themselves and for themselves.

Ultimately, only the masses can decide what Master Signifiers, ideas, principles and programmes they will give themselves. The paradox of a vanguard party is that like the Analyst, it must organize its own obsolescence.

Without abandoning those aspects of Dean's theory that are workable – the rejection of imaginary unity and the understanding of the party in terms of the Lacanian Discourse of the Analyst – where might the idea of the communist party takes us beyond the left deviation of a precarious communism that avoids the party altogether and a right deviation that organizes the party in accordance with collective desire? Beyond postmodernism, the core programme of the radical left must do more than champion democracy and must struggle to create new kinds of social relations that respond to a radically altered global situation. The revolution remains a historical necessity, and it must provide an organizational response to the new conditions of class struggle.

Žižek's In Defense of Lost Causes argues against the false opposition of individualism versus collectivism, which obscures capitalist hegemony and the ways in which those terms are wielded by the post-political left (Žižek, 2008: 346, 348). The question he asks instead is how can we break out of the paradigm that opposes the mode of production and the ontology of politics. One way to think about this is to consider how the mode of social reproduction might be coordinated through the production of social organization (Jameson, 2016). The party is the point of contact between the party as organizational mode of production and the subsumption of labour in the social factory. The party appears as both the neutral ground for the people's self-overcoming and an alienating partisan apparatus. For Žižek, the communist party does not seek legitimation from the people through negotiation but assumes state power directly in the form of political universality (Žižek, 2008: 377). As he puts it in his first book on Lenin, "the infamous 'knowledge' to be introduced to the working class from the outside by the Leninist party is of the same nature as the (supposed) knowledge in psychoanalysis" and constitutes a universal partisan truth, excluding dialogue with rightists (Žižek, 2002: 185). The production cycle is realized when workers endorse the party's revolutionary governance. The people accept a minimum of alienation – representation and leadership – so that

politicians can organize social processes. Where this distance is cancelled, he argues, when the interests of the people are directly reflected in the practices of the party is where you have totalitarianism. The fascist leader, for example, embodies the identity of the people as well as their true authentic interests. If capitalism simply supplies people what they want in terms of random material desires, the political form of the communist party, in contrast, “transubstantiates” the self-contradictory character of the people’s interests in favour of those who are most exploited (Žižek, 2008: 378).

As the solution to the contradictions of capitalism, the first paradox of communism is that revolution must enact its own principled forms of exclusion, beginning in the realm of economy, where, for instance, the services of a company like Google would be socialized and provided for free through public infrastructure. A second paradox is that the choice of centralized party organization, in addition to or as opposed to grassroots initiatives, would be recalibrated once such a party comes to power. Assuming it is legitimate in its egalitarian promise, it would then begin to stimulate and encourage those same grassroots efforts in order to legitimize its leadership. The obvious example here is the importance of the Soviets in guaranteeing the legitimacy of the Bolshevik Party at the time of the 1917 Russian Revolution. These two paradoxes, the first having to do with forces of production and the second having to do with political ideology, appear together already as the contradictions of capitalism. Since the early nineteenth-century, capitalism has been a desperate effort to overcome its limitations. This, Žižek argues, is where Marx got it wrong. Marx’s emphasis on the capitalist self-revolutionizing of material limits and inherent contradictions presumes that communism could overcome capitalist crises by bringing productivity to its full capacity. The post-capitalist fantasy of unleashed productivity beyond capital, Žižek argues, is inherent to capitalism (Žižek, 2014c: 146-7).

While Žižek criticizes those who want a revolution without a revolution, his difference from Dean is that he locates this excess not in the people-crowd but in the sphere of capitalist production. Politics must repoliticize the economy and disturb capital rather than individualism. Why, ask Heiko Feldner and Fabio Vighi, is communism not simply a matter of limiting politics to economics? (Feldner and Vighi, 2007) Feldner and Vighi

argue that the dialectical interrelation of economics and politics implies a critique of the various forms of anti-capitalist post-politics that seek to preserve liberal democracy and its social democratic compromises. The new political organizations must begin with a critique of the ways in which liberal democracy blackmails us by associating radical politics with totalitarianism. The political and economic levels must therefore be understood as separate instances of a unified approach (Feldner and Vighi, 2007: 56). The Discourses of the University and Hysteric compel us to leave behind the ideology of class struggle in favour of new arrangements of power-knowledge and pseudo-Gramscian forms of hegemonic contestation. The foreclosure of radical politics in favour of consensus, on the one hand, or of nomadic resistance, on the other, leads to the dominance of neoliberal technocracy and with it the reactive outbursts of the crowd. One cannot oppose global capitalism to the resurgence of racism, nationalism, xenophobia, fascism and fundamentalism since the one generates the others. For Žižek, the only way to break out of particularisms is to emphasize class struggle and the critique of political economy as the primary contradiction in the solidarity of struggles (Feldner and Vighi, 2007: 57).

For Žižek, the notion of revolution is an act that can alter the coordinates of a situation. An authentic act is neither conditioned by the existing situation, nor is it a form of obscene destruction. In other words, it is not an “inherent transgression” that is conditioned by the forces already at play. “Like the Lacanian analyst,” Žižek writes, “a political agent has to engage in acts which can be authorized only by themselves, for which there are no external guarantees. An authentic political act can be, in terms of its form, a democratic one as well as a non-democratic one” (Žižek, 2004: 87). Feldner and Vighi mention that in 1990 Žižek ran for office in Slovenia as a Liberal Democrat and against the alliance of former communists with nationalists. His criterion for acts that are self-authorized may be the purview of vanguards and may very well bypass the party form. Such acts are not justified through the mere numerical superiority of assembled masses. An authentic act, much like Badiou’s notion of an event, must change the rules of the game. In this regard, Žižek proposes the necessity of vanguards as catalysts for revolutionary change. Žižekian politics return us to the modalities of dialectical negation

that many on the left today abjure. Unlike disciplinary forms of power, negativity has no direct cause and implies separation from capitalism. The purpose of the party is to transpose the knowledge of the vanguards of communism into organizational forms.

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