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Communicative Capitalism and Neo-Feudalism: An Interview with Jodi Dean

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Aleks Wansbrough: You have recently written about neo-feudalism. I was wondering how you became interested in the idea, given your previous theorization of communicative capitalism.

Jodi Dean: I have been working on this concept of neo-feudalism for a little over a year. It is a thought experiment at this point as I am still figuring out whether neo-feudalism actually names something or whether it is just a metaphor.

I think it does name something, but I may be wrong. I started thinking about this idea because of McKenzie Wark's book, *Capitalism Is Dead*. She asks us to consider the possibility that we are no longer living under capitalism anymore but something worse.

The first time I came across her concept, my reaction was to dismiss it as stupid. Of course this is capitalism. But it kept eating at me. Usually, if you don't think an idea is a good idea you just forget it. This one just kept sticking to me.

So, I thought, what if I take it seriously? And I found it generative. What does it do to my thinking if I don't assume we are in capitalism anymore, but instead assume that capitalism could become something worse?

Very few of us are orthodox, determinist Marxists anymore. We don't accept a kind of developmentalist logic that is unitary across the whole world. That view has been rightly criticized and, frankly, I think it is basically a parody of what communists under state socialism were actually thinking.

But anyway, we aren't determinists anymore. Capitalism will end at some point; it has a history like any other system. But what its end is is

open, not determined. There are multiple possible ends. Accepting that we are not determinists means that socialism isn't necessarily going to be what happens next. At least, not without a fight.

It has always been within a Leninist conception that the stages don't unfold without a struggle. Politics is necessary. A political party is necessary. Revolution is necessary. In the absence of that—and it isn't looking great across the world now, but the potential is there—what if the unfolding that we are actually seeing is going in the direction of something worse? Neo-feudalism allows us to see tendencies in the present that indicate the limits of what capitalism can do, and what capitalism can name, and how we've got to understand our anti-capitalist struggle. That's the general wager behind the project.

AW: That's very interesting regarding the idea of neo-feudalism. What are the defining characteristics of neo-feudalism?

JD: I think of neo-feudalism as having four basic characteristics. It isn't like European feudalism is coming back in a big way—it would be stupid to think it was. There's not even one European feudalism. And around the world there are all different kinds of feudalism. Feudalism is one of these contested terms and it is going to have all different kinds of meaning. This is why I emphasize four features that identify tendencies in the present.

The first is the parcelization of sovereignty, which is a way of saying that legal regimes are fragmented. States are involved in all sorts of international treaties, corporations can sue states, and state laws are fragmented within themselves and apply differently to rich and poor; they apply differently to races in the United States. While that's illegal that's still the reality of the legal regime. The bourgeois parliamentary fiction is really apparent as a fiction. We don't have that uniform law. And so sovereignty is parcelled or parcelized. This term comes from the work of Ellen Meiksins Wood and Perry Anderson and their descriptions of feudalism.

The second characteristic is the new lords and new serfs. Particularly with the vast fortunes made in technology, we have an incredible hierarchy and inequality that is much more segmented than the fiction of opportunity under capitalism would have us believe. Over the last twenty years there is less upward social mobility in the US than England and England has

a monarchy . . . and a landed aristocracy! But England has more social mobility than we do. There's this kind of fixity of wealth in a handful of families in the US and an increase in mass immiseration for the rest.

You can think of this demographically. But then you start looking at the new lords of the internet: Amazon, Google, Facebook, Apple. And the way they act like little states. They negotiate with states. Apple's capitalization is over two trillion. That's mind-boggling. That's more than lots of countries.

The next characteristic is hinterlandization. It's a way of expressing mass urbanization, adding in what happens to the mass of areas that have been depleted, that have been abandoned, that are now the sites of vast warehouses that are used for Amazon shipping. The hinterlands have essentially been left out or left behind by capital but they have real people living there, struggling to get by, to keep their communities intact. I live in a semi-rural area where hospitals have been shut down. It is like, "Okay people, you are left behind. Your lives are inconsequential because you aren't doing anything for capital. Your lives don't matter."

There's a great book by Phil Neel called *Hinterlands* where he sees this pattern across the world. He talks about the US, China, the Ukraine, as just some examples.

And the fourth feature I think of as kind of a new preoccupation with apocalypse, a mystical embrace of catastrophe. An example might be Peter Thiele, the Silicon Valley billionaire, who talks about tech companies as being little kingdoms and having a feudal logic. He emphasizes that democracy is really over.

Those are the four features that I associate with neo-feudalism. By clarifying these and seeing how the big four or five tech companies contribute to neo-feudalism, we can start to see how communicative capitalism's own unfolding is leading to processes and forms not traditionally associated with capitalism but associated with feudalism.

AW: I've often thought with respect to libertarians and anarcho-capitalists that it is pretty clear that they want a neo-feudal order. They don't want to get rid of the state. They want to multiply the state by making every estate function as a state, with a privatized military, firefighters and so on.

JD: This is parcellated sovereignty. You're saying the billionaires want their own states with their own security forces, with only enough of a state to

protect their billions. But not the kind of state that has the interests of anyone else in mind. Sorry to interrupt but I was taken by the way that you were talking about that with the billionaires.

AW: Yeah, it seems like they want to destroy government and the idea of the people because that hinders their power. I fear that may tie in with other tendencies becoming dominant. Your concept of neo-feudalism really connects with this idea of the way the fringe Right have embraced hierarchies and medieval conceptions of a Divine Chain of Being. Jordan Peterson's lobster hierarchy . . . or even Incels who have this concept that there are betas and alphas/chads. Everything is being thought of as instilled in nature. I didn't really think of it like that before I read your essays on the subject but the feudal order is emerging in so many pockets of ideology. That said, we keep hearing comparisons between capitalism and statist ideology, which suggests the concept that the state is the problem rather than capitalism as though the two were separate.

JD: There's a journalist, Vladislav Inozemtsev, who has criticized contemporary Russia in the guise that it is becoming neo-feudal. Inozemtsev associates Putin's government as statist and feudal, because Russia is not sufficiently marketized. Whereas the argument I'm making is that the marketization is making it neo-feudal.

There's a right-wing guy, who I find very interesting, named Joel Kotkin, who has multiple articles and at least two books where he pushes the neo-feudal hypothesis. Essentially his analysis is of California and Silicon Valley, and the decline of large-scale manufacturing jobs. But he adds to his analysis what he presents as a Silicon Valley, Green Hollywood, priestly cast holding the feudal order in place and thereby preventing the car-driving, suburban yeoman class from having their democratic life. What's interesting is the Kotkin is trying to mobilize a pro-gasoline, pro-car, pro-suburban, pro-religion-family-patriarchy idea, a US suburbs in the 1950s idea, against the spectre of neo-feudalism.

The view neo-feudalism here has the same sort of Silicon Valley, pro-computer, tech industry dynamic I describe. The difference is that Kotkin wants to use the idea to galvanize a capitalism against it. What I think is so insightful is that he recognizes that capitalism is under threat, but he thinks that you can hold onto capitalism and it can somehow

defeat neo-feudalism. I don't know how he thinks you can actually defeat neo-feudalism that way. My argument is no, no, no. It is capitalism that is producing this. You can't go back to your gasoline suburbs given climate change, with the dynamics set in motion from communicative capitalism.

AW: There was a point when people kept likening the internet to some sort of virtual utopian communism or socialism, where no one owns anything. Of course, that's nonsense. Everything online is owned. There was that hope in the '90s, and more recently though about the internet being pure democracy. I remember people talking about Twitter—I think in 2007—in such a utopian way. When do you think that hope for the internet as democracy in action waned? Was it just with the election of Trump that people stopped having that naïve faith in the internet?

JD: I love that question. I think what I want to say is that it goes in waves. So, I noted a strong anti-internet turn in the late '90s—1997 and 1998. And there were a couple of things standing out such as cyberporn, which was considered a huge deal, and then also online gambling. Cyberporn, online gambling, and then the Heaven's Gate group.

Some of these '90s fears seem to track to Heaven's Gate: a group of people you could call a commune or a cult—but I'll just call them a cult—somewhere in California that all dressed in dark Maoist suits or pyjamas and had shaved heads. They all killed themselves because they were waiting for the comet Hale-Bopp to transmit them into the dust of the comet. Many of Heaven's Gate were programmers and somehow their mindset got translated into a lot of different articles about the internet, which was sort of weird as it wasn't directly relevant. But critics, analysts, and public intellectuals thought that somehow this group was a window into something important about the internet. Maybe because the “cultists” were weird, maybe because they were programmers, maybe because of the bad circulation of information—but it was registered as this dark turn. It was the first time when the newness was wearing off. It was also the first time when the capitalist use of the internet for commerce became a bigger deal, and people started to look at the internet in terms of how to make money online.

Then people get more positive again with Web 2.0. And then excitement grew with social media. But the more powerful Facebook became. . . . When Facebook didn't go the way of MySpace, when it didn't fade but became

more and more powerful, folks started to become more negative because it was harder to hold onto this notion of the internet as a democracy, when you have such a few entities.

I don't have a great date on this, but I think it was in 2005 and after that it has all been downhill. I think it is 2005 because that's when blogs are peaking, that's when they are still interesting . . . and a site of discussion. Social media, such as Facebook, hadn't totally taken over. But then, when they did, that really defeated the blogosphere. It became clear that you would just have commercial spaces rather than the whole mass web of interesting small spaces. That would be my rough guess. Things were getting critical way before Trump.

AW: I'm going to ask one of those dumb, superficial, overly broad questions that I hope will give you the opportunity to invent something more interesting from. To what extent do you think the internet has actually changed social relations versus how much do you think the internet has developed and changed with social relations.

I think Fredric Jameson says in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* that technology is mostly just the "outer emblem or symptom" of social and cultural structures. So for instance, you mention that initial interest in the internet, which kind of coincides with the "end of ideology," "end of history" narrative where liberal democracy and the supposed direct democracy of the market will dominate. The "Hooray, hooray! Everyone and everywhere is going to be free and open and more democratic"—sentiment. And that carried on with the internet. So you could frame it as the internet is just reflecting these social currents. That doesn't seem entirely true, but I also am not sure to what extent the internet is the prime mover. I would be curious to get your thoughts on navigating that tension.

JD: I think one would want to state that the internet doesn't reflect social currents as much as create them. Just think intuitively. Many of us have relationships with people we would never have face to face. We have circles of friends that we interact with regularly that are all over the world and very far from where we live. The fact that we have daily interaction with people from around the whole world is something that is very new. That is one way that the internet changes social interactions. Then if we think more materially . . . we could think of the way that network media has changed

jobs, production, the collapse of all sorts of different print media such as newspapers and magazines, how it has transformed journalism, how difficult it is to get paid. Further, there is the change from paid labor to free labor, which means that you can't eat. All of these developments render it clear that the internet has changed social life. The dramatic increase of inequality, the collapse of stores, like brick-and-mortar stores, all the loss of those jobs and positions. I think economically speaking, it has been transformative of social life. Utterly transformative of social life, and economically speaking, not for the better.

AW: Raymond Williams was critical of the idea that technology in and of itself shapes society in so far as technology had to be invested in and developed—but he nevertheless makes the point that the means of communication are also means of production. They organize labor, they shape labor, they communicate to labor and so on . . .

JD: I think that's really important. The means of communication *are means of production*. So when we talk about technology, we're not just talking about my laptop or about the wireless WiFi router, but rather we're talking about what are the actions, activities, and relationships that are mediated through these items. With this in mind, I think that it's important, too, in any discussion of technology, that we move beyond just talking about the tech object. When people talk only about the tech object, they fall prey to a horrible commodity fetishism that obscures the relations that are brought together or concealed in the technological object.

AW: Thinking between fetishized object and fetishized self . . . it is interesting, too, if you look at facial surgery and its connection to apps that modify facial features. . . . I tested one of these apps recently. I was amazed. I could change the size of my top and bottom lip and it really makes one think of oneself as a commodity. I mean, I've made the argument that we are kind of becoming dead labor, and I'd love to get your thoughts on it. There's a sense in which, according to Marx, technology gains agency and we now have technological selves, modified forms, and therefore must become part of dead labor. In order to gain agency we have to make ourselves commodities.

JD: That's a fascinating argument. I look forward to reading it; to think of humans becoming dead labor, which gives new meaning to the zombie motif. It gives a whole different inflection to the prevalence of zombies in mass culture.

Regarding selfies, I've been thinking about selfies, too, and I was trying to think of what's a more Marxist analysis of selfies. And I tried to make the argument that selfies are a totally communist form because selfies are not about individuals at all. They are a combined practice of sharing faces. Faces have become commons in reaction gifs, people using other people's faces to reflect their own feelings and reactions all the time. In this respect, the selfie is not a picture of me but a picture of me participating in the common practice of making a selfie. Someone taking a photograph of me has a different valence from a selfie. Selfies are not about individuals; they are about the reflexive form of making a photo to share. So, I think you have the critical valence of the de-individuation of selfies and I was thinking of a more emancipatory valence that could be possible.

In order to make this case, I draw on Walter Benjamin and the change in the meaning of the work of art brought about by technological reproducibility and importability. There is a shift in the iconic art in the church and the galleries to something in one's own hand that is immediately shareable. That's the underlying argument in terms of thinking about it as selfie-communism.

AW: That's brilliant. I've never thought of selfies in that way. It is interesting how there are these kinds of communistic or potentially communist forms arising online. Changing the topic somewhat, you mentioned earlier that it wasn't looking good for a revolution. I was wondering what potential there is for the internet to organize a revolution against the capitalist system.

JD: A couple of things. I don't know if you remember back to the Egyptian uprising. The media was labelling it the Facebook Revolution, and I think they were also saying that of Iran. No, wait, Egypt was the Facebook revolution and Iran was the Twitter revolution. Anyway, in both cases the use of network communication was deemed beneficial to the forces that were uprising and the way that they got their messages out. But ultimately, the end result has not been mass increases in well-being, democracy, and socialism.

People recognize that network media is used for uprising but so are streets. Digital technology doesn't tell us that much about the quality, the character of, the outcome of an uprising.

Right now, the United States is in a situation that looks a lot like an incipient, fragmented civil war. There are lots of protests going on and people have been killed at protests. There is an intensifying police presence but also of the military and national guard. And in response, there is an intensifying protest against that presence all over. And we know it is happening because of social media with people uploading videos and sharing messages.

There is a way that social media networks are increasing an awareness of resistance and of state crime, state violence, police violence, and police oppression. But is it being super useful in uniting these struggles? I'm not sure about that. It makes them apparent to one another as struggles. But is it uniting in a way that lets them be fought as a common struggle? Again I'm not super-optimistic on that right now. That takes an extra step, extra work— real organizational work beyond spontaneous sharing.

My pessimism would also say that the more effectively that people use social media to organize, the more likely they are to be surveilled and the more likely they are to have their networks shut down. We're likely to have greater intensification of surveillance or the dismantling of particular kinds of sites.

Right now, though, social media is helpful in getting messages out. Practically speaking then, we have to be dialectical and recognize that it is going to have a good side and a bad side.

Thinking dialectically, the more people focus on the internet and network communication as the important thing, the less they focus on building a revolutionary party capable of forwarding a revolutionary movement and having some kind of plan for what happens afterward.

The problem with Egypt is that they were great on Facebook but they didn't have a coalition of Left forces strong enough to deal with the post-revolutionary situation, or the day after the removal of the government. That's where the money is, that's where the problem is, that's where the issue is.

AW: Cornell West and Nina Turner endorsed the People's Party. Is that a possibility for insurrection? Obviously they have not endorsed revolutionary action and are seeking coalitions. But a name like that, People's Party, has some evocation of revolutionary fervour and action. Could that become a revolutionary party? Some people are also looking to infiltrate the

DSA and make it more radical. Could these parties become more overtly workers-focused parties?

JD: I think that's a hard question in part because the United States is a huge country. As you say, there is the People's Party, there is the DSA. Both of them are electorally focused. They are not centered on building street-level fighting power. They are not looking to build a revolutionary party that would have a place in the street-level struggles that are going on. Or have the capacity to push those struggles in a revolutionary direction.

From my perspective, that kind of revolutionary party is necessary . . . a revolutionary party that is oriented around the struggle for socialism and is deeply involved in the movements on the streets. And I would call that a working-class party, recognizing that a working-class party is never the same thing as a union. A working-class party always recognizes that the working-class lives in a community, has schools, and has lives as well jobs.

These movements in the streets are working-class movements. The ruling class doesn't need to be in the streets. They have the law and the networks and they can just pick up their phone and call their banker and ship the money and whatever. So, I think that a revolutionary party of the working class is what's necessary.

AW: I've been following the Left-wing content in the US online, where online there are endless fights between whether or not to vote for Biden or whether to hit the streets protesting. There seems to be a tension between electoral action and direct action, but neither camp seem to be talking about revolutionary action or how to take the means of production into collective or community ownership.

JD: I think I'll use the Black Panther Party as an example. They're often what people think of in terms of their achievements with mutual aid or community help. And I'm thinking specifically about the writing of an imprisoned member of the Black Panther Party, George Jackson in his book, *Blood in My Eye*. He talks a lot about programs like the breakfast program. He says that when we're building our work out of the needs of the community, what we're doing is raising consciousness of the failure of the system to meet those needs, we're raising consciousness of the larger structure of inequalities that has produced the situation where communities don't

have money, they can't go buy this or that, their conditions suck, their kids are having to get free breakfast. The whole process of the aid work is consciousness-raising activities. I mean you could be helping kids do their homework, you could be teaching English as a second language, creating an urban garden; those are means for consciousness building, building trust and future cadre. That's not a fast process. That's going to be a long process.

But also building a third party is not a fast process; that is also a long process.

Online Left discussions sometimes feel totally disembodied so that people claim that direct action is the only thing that makes something happen and use the example of defunding the police: This or that city council has changed how they fund police.

Well, for that to happen you had to have some people in the city council who were willing to hear the messages on the street and ready to implement the changes. But also one budget line may be cut regarding police funding but the police are getting more money from a different budget line, which means that we require follow-through.

What is necessary is an array of mass tactics for revolutionary struggle. Even Lenin stated that sometimes you have to participate in bourgeois parliament. That's a basic Leninist view but it doesn't mean that the Bolsheviks only focused on electoralism as we all know. The problem is when one tries to make it one thing or the other.

AW: Recently, you've noted the disintegration of the ability to have a dialogue between liberals and Leftists. I've also noticed online that people critical of Biden from a Leftist position—whether Marxist or Anarchist—are immediately accused of being a Russian Bot. It seems like centrists are rehashing cold war propaganda against Trump while also affirming the credibility of the CIA. At the same time, the Right in the US and in Australia, and increasingly the UK, call anything Marxist or Communist.

JD: I'm glad to know this is characteristic of the discussion in Australia as well as the US. I would be curious to know whether this is a long remnant of anti-communism or has someone on the Right—someone like Steve Bannon or someone else—distributed a manual that people on the Right could use for fighting their opponents. So, it would be interesting to know how

much of this is a new iteration, and how much of this is just pulling out something old from the knapsack that they carry around. I don't know if there's a continuity or a newness.

It is very strong in the US. The Trump campaign was painting Biden as beholden to Marxists and Left extremists. What is so frustrating for people on the Left or even slightly on the Left, is that it is so far from the truth: Biden has not come out against fracking, he does not support Medicare for all, he has not made any social welfare provisions key to his platform. I don't think he has much of a platform other than "I'm not Trump."

But the Marxist stain is attached to him. It could have been someone like Bernie who it would almost make sense to call a Marxist. If the Right are going to call someone a Marxist, why not choose a candidate even close to being a Marxist?

AW: Yes, the choice of Biden over Sanders was depressing. I think, had I been a US citizen, I would have been tempted by the Bernie or Bust movement but then with COVID, almost everyone has been guilt-tripped into backing Biden and the DNC.

JD: On the issue of COVID, right now the number of deaths in the United States is over half a million. I don't know what it is like in Australia. You guys have done substantially better, right?

AW: We have. The number of dead are just under 1000.

JD: Oh my god. How is that possible? How is it possible that your country handled it so well? There's a higher number of dead in my county.

AW: I've been even more impressed by the Marxist Leninist governments in Vietnam, and Cuba.

JD: They have been very impressive.

AW: The reason that Australia has been able to pursue lockdown measures and handle the crisis is arguably due to the States and Territories rather than the Prime Minister. There is a suspicion that the Australian Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, might have pursued a more US/UK approach. But

there is a political context here. Scott Morrison responded so poorly to the Australian bushfires and wildfires—firefighters were refusing to shake his hand—that he was ready to permit decisive action on COVID, and manage the coronavirus. On the ground, there were lockdowns, quotas of how many people could visit and a strict context where visiting was and was not permitted; restrictions regarding funeral attendance; schools and universities often went online; there were fines for sitting too long in one spot of a park. The government advised that those who could work from home should. But the Murdoch media have been attacking these restrictions, so we'll see what happens.

JD: I found the Right-wing attack on COVID restrictions interesting. In general, the Right is against public healthcare and ideas of public health. They say that public health is communist and I think we should own that. Yes, public health and the collective benefit are communist values, and you are crazy not to want that. So, go ahead and do the label.

The other thing that is curious about the Right-wing attack is that they hate the masks. They say the masks are muzzles and, again, that this is some totalitarian dictatorship or whatever. What I kind of love about it is that the masks take away the individuality and individualism that are so crucial to capitalist owned self-marketing. Of course, the reality of capitalism is different from the individualist rhetoric: the reality immiserates and massifies the majority and holds up the few. But the ideology is one that celebrates individualism . . .

I think it is kind of great to have all these people wearing masks for the benefit of everyone else. There is a message that I will sacrifice my own individual self-presentation, in order to be like everyone else, for the sake of everyone else. In a weird way, the Right-wing attack gets at a core truth that's underlying the collectivity that is necessary for combatting a global pandemic.

AW: That is very interesting perspective. I initially laughed at Rightists saying that wearing masks was communist. For example, there was a screen capture of a Tweet purportedly from the extreme Right-winger Stefan Molyneux—a YouTube figure who calls himself an anarcho-capitalist, though many consider him a fascist and cult leader—saying something to the effect that medical masks are burkas for communists.

JD: That's great. I think that's great. I want a T-Shirt that says that with a hammer and sickle on it. The Right think there's something wrong with that, but I think that's something to celebrate.

AW: I'm conscious of your time and I think that's a great place to end the discussion. Thank you so much.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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