Subjects, Contexts and Modes of Critique: Reflections on Jodi Dean's Chapter

Paulina Tambakaki

In *Philosophy and Real Politics* Raymond Geuss takes issue with ideal theories of politics. Ideal theories, he argues, start from a 'few general principles' that they posit as historically invariant (2008, 7). They explain and justify these principles and they then draw conclusions about how people ought to live and act. Missing from these theories is a reflection on what Geuss refers to as 'contexts of action', that is, historically situated conjunctures that affect human motivations and shape political actions (Geuss 2008, 9–11). Any responsible (and realist) theory, insists Geuss, must take these contexts of action into account. For they frame and augment our grasp of politics and the ways it might be refigured. Jodi Dean's study of the conditions of communicative capitalism exemplifies this framing.

Communicative capitalism, explains Dean, desubjectifies. It makes it hard to see the political subject that is capable of political action because the collectivity that carries out this action is, in this context, blocked. Dissolved into the individual who registers her outrage on social media, collectivity is treated with suspicion and rendered obsolete. At the same time, according to Dean, neo-liberal mantras of self-management, self-reliance and self-care further

singularise. They reinforce themes of individual survival and, in so doing, they erode the prospects for a collectivisation that aims to transform – and not simply critique – individuating trends.

For Dean, collective subjects have the capacity to transform politics, and these subjects find proto-expression in the egalitarian discharges of the crowd. While these discharges are temporary, they show that it is possible to transgress the individuating and, ultimately, depoliticising conditions of communicative capitalism. More to the point, the crowds (of users, followers, hashtags and so on), with their power law distributions that communicative capitalism paradoxically produces, serve, according to Dean, as openings for the emergence of a politicised subject that is more forceful (because it is divided and collective); more permanent (because it persists after the event); and more radical (because it aims to displace and seize the system). *This* subject demands work, argues Dean. Political organisation, in the form of a vanguard, carries this work forward, undoing the normalisations of communicative capitalism. Or to put it in Dean's words: 'beyond critique is collectivity'. This argument without doubt provokes refreshing questions about the limits of critique.

Political theories have long been obsessed with the central role that critique plays in a transformative politics. From Boltanski and Chiapello's call to revive the social and artistic critiques of capitalism in order to resist it (2007), to agonistic theories that stress the excesses that arise to contest and disrupt politics, it is difficult to overlook the intimate connection established between change and critique. On the back of the assumption that dispute, resistance and dissent expose exclusions, a consensus has formed about the benefits of critique, in terms of the openings it makes possible for alternative politics. Dean unsettles this consensus when she tells us that it is collectivity, rather than critique, that is needed in order to transform socio-political configurations. Critique is not enough in the context of communicative capitalism, argues Dean, and she is right. While there are manifold disputes over the meanings and practices of contemporary politics, such disputes leave few traces; the crowd events of, say, the *Aganaktismenoi* or the Occupy movements tend to dissolve once the events have ended. There is also more opportunity for individuation and little opportunity for collectivisation understood as processes. And there are vulnerabilities, exploitations, outrage and conformity – in other words, desubjectification, much like Dean explains. But is collectivisation the answer to these developments? Or to put the same question in somewhat more exaggerated terms, is more politics the answer to the lack of transformative politics?

No doubt, the response one gives to this question largely depends on the diagnosis of the problem that collectivity claims to solve – in this case, the individuating and singularising trends that animate much of contemporary activism and certain strands of digital critique. But what if there is no disagreement in diagnosis? As I have already noted, I find Dean's account of the political challenges that arise in the wake of a communicative capitalism convincing. This agreement is exactly what, however, leads me, in a second step, to ponder

whether Dean's diagnosis ends up undermining the argument that a collectivity *can* arise in and out of power law distributional openings. The emphasis on the verb 'can' draws in many ways on a familiar if not commonplace argument in the literature. When it comes to envisioning the rise of the exploited or even of the conformists, questions hover about their ability to rise, given that they are significantly incapacitated by the systems and discourses that have dominated them. If this is the case, then it becomes difficult to see how the desubjectivations of communicative capitalism can be overcome, individuating tendencies transgressed, and collectivities formed.

Of course, it is noteworthy that communicative capitalism does produce crowds and that such crowds gesture toward collectivity – especially as they can offer glimmers of division, subjectivation and egalitarian demands. But what if these crowds do not deliver any politics, because they do not manage to elicit a response to the crowd event? The issue here is not so much that collectivities are unable to form because they have become incapacitated, but that vanguards have failed to make the appearance of the crowd persist. When we think of the divisions that inhere in discussions about political organisation, then it is not unreasonable to consider the possibility that vanguards might not be immediately available to counter the hierarchies that complex networks of communication establish. And if vanguards are not available, then the crowd might be all we have left to do politics *and* critique. For example, when I think of the Occupy movements I cannot deny the effectiveness of their critique of the institutional establishment grounded on the slogan 'we are the 99%'. What I want to contest, however, is whether this critique brought any rupture to the political establishment – and if it did what kind of rupture this was. In other words, the claim I want to advance with this example is that the critiques that crowds develop might be durable after the event without immediately leading to any transformative politics. This widening split between transformation and critique calls forth a serious rethinking not just of the aims (and perhaps even limits) of critique, but also of the relation between democracy and critique, for we are accustomed to think that democracies are sites of openness and, inevitably, of transformation and critique.

Dean takes issue with democracy, and particularly with Hardt and Negri's faith in democratic practices as vehicles for change. Democratic practices, she argues, harness unequal outcomes and one-versus-many distributions. Understood as the 'people's' choice to use and forward', democracy produces 'significant' hashtags that nurture inequalities and entrench hierarchies. For these reasons, democracy, and Hardt and Negri's preferred modes of horizontal and autonomous organisation, are too limited as platforms for change, not because change is difficult to achieve, but because such institutions are easily displaced as vehicles that support the exploitative system they seek to resist. This thought-provoking argument presses us to consider anew *how* change occurs within and through democratic institutions (if at all). Indeed, if the democratic lexicon is, as Dean intimates, supportive of communicative capitalism, then perhaps there

is little value in expecting that change might come through democratic institutions. There would also be little value in investing in democratic institutions.

Dean thus suggests that the time has come to disinvest from democratic institutions and to anticipate the emergence of another, more political and more equal, world around the common of communism. The common she tells us, *pace* Hardt and Negri, is hierarchical. Its hierarchies call for an oppositional politics that inspires fidelity and change. But what if this common (digitalised or not) is analogous to what Jacques Rancière (1999) understands by the order of the police, and therefore as something immune to anything other than collective, if momentary, subjectivations? This grim possibility that confronts most attempts to envision another politics taps into existing anxieties generated by communicative capitalism. From my perspective, it serves as an opportunity to bolster our energies to rework politics, democracy and the limits of critiques. It is in this direction that Dean's 'Collectivity or Critique' takes an inspiring and thought-provoking lead.

References

Boltanski, Luc and Eve Chiapello. 2007. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London and New York: Verso.

Geuss, Raymond. 2008. *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Rancière, Jacques. 1999. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Translated by Julie Rose. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.