



Dean, Jodi. (2019). *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging*. New York: Verso Books. Hardcover: \$19.95

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BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Jodi Dean's *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging* positions the word comrade against the popular term ally. Dean argues that the idea of the comrade is more collective than ally, which focuses on individual identity. Contrary to stereotypes of the comrade figure as only a white male one, Dean traces the rich history of women and comrades of color in the communist movement. She reasons that what binds comrades together is not based on shared identity, but rather the action of a shared struggle.

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In this short work, Jodi Dean offers a theory of the comrade: a figure she sets forth as necessary for building a new politics on the Left. Layered with historical accounts of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), Dean argues the figure of the comrade can combat the Left's antipathy of the party form (a form Dean sees as necessary to politics), the individualized focus of identity politics, and the larger structures of neoliberal capitalism. Her work suggests that the political horizon of the Left must be built on collective struggle, and one way to make this return to the collective is through the figure of the comrade.

In Chapter 1, Dean lays out the conceptual bounds of the comrade and distinguishes it from other forms of association. Defining the comrade as "a generic figure for the political relation between those on the same side of a political struggle,"¹ Dean argues the comrade carries with it a certain set of expectations – "Comrades have to be able to count on each other even when we don't like each other and even when we disagree".² The comrade decenters the individualized focus that other words of relation or association carry with them. Positioning the comrade against the popularized term "ally," Dean's theory of comradeship offers a more concrete path to political change. Since allyship is hyper-identity focused and targets the individual via self-help style guides and tutorials, it misses the larger structural issues at play and positions politics as singularly situated at the individual level. Allyship as a form to fight oppression is politically vacuous. Dean suggests the figure of the comrade is more politically useful because it is grounded in sameness and genericity.

Dean goes on to explain the importance of the generic comrade figure in Chapter 2. Using a speculative-composite methodology, Dean mines the history of communism to construct examples that provide moments of "past hopes and old lessons" that can be used under the current conditions of patriarchal racial capitalism.³ Here, Dean spends some time responding to worries that the comrade evokes ideas of and privileges a white, masculine figure. These constructions, Dean argues, ignores the rich history of communism and the work of women comrades and comrades of color (particularly Black comrades) in the communist movement. Thus, the sameness and genericity important for the figure of the comrade does not erase difference, but rather "provides a container indifferent to its contents."⁴ A form opposed to the current hyper-focus on identity and the individual, the comrade is a relation that entails taking a side in a struggle. What binds comrades together, then, is not a shared identity or positionality, but a shared commitment to a political struggle. In the age of online allyship and activism, the comrade offers a different path forward. In the past year, Instagram and Twitter feeds have been filled with aesthetically pleasing how-to guides on allyship and lessons on social justice. While potentially informative and useful, Dean argues this approach to political struggle is amorphous, not grounded in concrete action, and politically inadequate. The comrade grounds collective struggle in a sameness that works against the siloing effect of individualized activism.

Chapter 3 lays out the four theses of the comrade: 1) the comrade names a relation characterized by sameness, equality, and solidarity; 2) anyone but not everyone can be a comrade; 3) the Individual (as a locus of identity) is the "Other" of the comrade; and 4) the relation between comrades is mediated by a fidelity to a truth. The equality of the comrade is grounded in a relation that cuts through the hierarchical ordering based on race, sex, gender, and/or class in patriarchal capitalist societies. Equality in comradeship is rooted in solidarity; comrades are equal because they are on the same side and share the same struggle. Theses 2 and 3 extend and expand notions of the generic comrade. It is not rooted in a particular identity; thus, anyone can be a comrade. Since comradeship entails taking a side, not everyone can/will be a comrade. Finally, what binds comrades together is "fidelity to the emancipatory egalitarian struggle for communism."⁵ Dean also describes four characteristics of the comrade: discipline, joy, enthusiasm, and courage. Because the comrade is bounded by party structure, the party provides discipline that helps direct its comrades. This discipline enables an "intense

1 Jodi Dean, *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging*. (New York: Verso Books, 2019), 3.

2 Ibid., 4.

3 Ibid., 25.

4 Ibid., 35.

5 Ibid., 97.

collectivity” that allows “comrades [to] do the impossible.”⁶ Comrades experience joy through this “sense of collective invincibility.”⁷ This then leads to enthusiasm for the collective work – “Enthusiasm is the surplus that collective discipline generates.”⁸ Above all, comrades are courageous, willing to submit themselves to critique and to constant learning and study that is necessary for collective political work.

Dean concludes the book by considering the reasons one decides to no longer be a comrade. Providing four scenarios—expulsion, resignation, drift, and the end of the world—Dean details different circumstances that may lead one to leave the party and end their relationship as a comrade. Dean provides these scenarios of failure as moments of learning. As she reminds readers, “failures happen,” but that does not mean one should not begin.⁹ The possibility of failure should not foreclose starting. Speaking to skeptics on the Left, Dean argues the organization of the party and comradeship is necessary to combat capitalism. It is only through belonging and collective organizing that substantial political change can be won. Discipline and organization also combat the effects of neoliberalism on the individual and provide them with a necessary framework to organize individuals who are exhausted, overworked, underpaid, lack resources, and so on.

Dean’s figure of the comrade is timely given the summer of protests sparked by the police murder of George Floyd. The moment seems ripe for those of the Left to take up Dean’s call to build a collective movement centered around the figure of the comrade. As calls to identity increasingly ring hollow, the comrade provides fertile ground for taking seriously collective organizing that can combat systems of racial capitalism. Unlike shareable Instagram images with easy “how-to” guides on allyship, the comrade can solidify the Left in a more concrete way. Given the last year of the Covid-19 pandemic, the increasingly intensifying racial tension due to state sanctioned violence, and the isolation and exhaustion that comes from living and surviving in a neoliberal capitalist regime, Dean’s comrade reminds us that “sometimes just knowing that we have comrades who share our commitments, our joys, and our efforts to learn from defeats makes political work possible where it was not before.”¹⁰

In essence, Dean’s work is a timely read that provides those on the Left with actionable ways to move forward and organize. It speaks to old debates about sameness and difference, but situates them in the current moment of increasing individualization. As any good theoretical work should, it leaves readers with tangible ideas on why and how the figure of the comrade should become our new figure of political belonging.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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6 Ibid., 88.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 89.

9 Ibid., 102.

10 Ibid., 101.

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