



Spring 2020  
*Socialists of Caltech*  
**Discussion Group**  
**Comrade by Jodi Dean**

*“The truth is very simple, but sometimes implementation of the truth--that’s where difficulty arises. The word is Constant. Political. Education. ...Capitalism’s weakest point is the lies it tells. Our strongest point is the truth we tell.”*

- **Kwame Ture**

**Text:** *Comrade* by Jodi Dean

**Submit discussion questions** [here!](#)

**Meeting Time:** Tuesdays from 6:00-7:30 PM

**Meeting Schedule:** Weekly

Date	Assigned Reading
March 31, 2020	No Scheduled Reading
April 7, 2020	<i>Comrade</i> , Chapter 1
April 15, 2020	<i>Comrade</i> , Chapter 2
April 28, 2020	<i>Comrade</i> , Chapter 3
May 5, 2020	<i>Comrade</i> , Chapter 4

# Discussion Questions:

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## Chapter 1:

- 1. Interpersonal Conflict:** Dean readily points to the superiority of the concept of comradeship over allyship in terms of effectively waging international political struggle against racialized patriarchal capitalism. Even so, political organizing often involves interactions between individuals, and sometimes these interactions involve conflict along axes of identity--is there anything to be salvaged from the concept of allyship? Where does the concept of solidarity fit in in the spectrum of allyship to comradeship as Dean renders in the text? Is there a danger in subordinating other struggles to promote our own, and what/who are we willing to compromise in this regard?
- 2. What is SoC?:** How do we envision the structure of our own organization along the axes Dean defines in the text? Are we a party? Are we emulating party forms? What do we do to build comradeship through common struggle? Are there areas we think we can improve in, given the discussion in Chapter 1?
- 3. New Relationships:** Dean writes, "The power of comrade is in how it negates old relations and promises new ones--the promise itself ushers them in, welcoming the new comrade into relations irreducible to their broader setting." Given the hierarchies of our relationships at Caltech (staff - undergrad - grad student - postdoc - advisor)--atomized into individual research groups, subfields, and other such formations--how does comradeship through common struggle open up the possibility of new kinds of relationships between members of the "Caltech community"?
  - a. New Horizons:** Dean also writes, "It is readily apparent today that the communist horizon is the horizon of political struggle not for the nation but for the world." We can imagine that such horizons not just at the international level, but also exist in all sites of struggles in a capitalist society like our own. Caltech is such a site of struggle. What do we see as the horizon of political struggle at Caltech, and what role does comradeship play?
- 4. Constant. Political. Education:** Dean writes of the allyship model of education, "The process of education is isolating, individuating." What can we do to combat this mode of education in our discussion groups, to make it interactive, a space for growth, and for the continuation of the struggle? Are there shortcomings to our approach? Education is never complete, so what can we reasonably expect of an individual during the process of political education?
- 5. Bernie 2020:** Bernie Sanders' 2020 Presidential campaign featured the slogan #NotMeUs, and phrases such as "fight for someone you don't know." Is there any sense in which the Bernie 2020 campaign engendered comradeship, even as it succumbed to the various issues of electoralism in the United States?
  - a. Which Party?:** Related to the above question, Dean centers the revolutionary party form as a site of comradeship. If we accept that the Democratic Party is not a revolutionary party (lol), does Sanders' attempt to build comradeship within this party ultimately confuse masses of working people? Or is there organizing potential to be salvaged here?

## Chapter 2:

- 1. Dynamism:** The subtitle of Dean's work is "An Essay on Political Belonging." In our last discussion, we discussed the conflicts that can arise between political organizers that involve social factors like race and gender. Such conflicts could lead to a disruption of the political belonging implied by the notion of comrade. Dean salvages the legacy of political belonging in the CPUSA by highlighting the dynamic processes that led to spirited debates on race and gender. **A simple question then--is dynamism and debate enough? What are our responsibilities when it comes to explicitly anti-racist and anti-patriarchal work?**
- 2. :dialectic-vince:** Dean writes "Forgetting history could also be thought to imply that *comrade* is a synonym for *proletarian*, which has itself suffered from an excessive and exclusive masculinization. But, already in the nineteenth century, comrade was used by the female and male socialists with commitments to widespread social transformation. The genericity of comrade lets it encompass not just women and men but various and changing assumptions regarding gender." Let's problematize this.
  - a. In the first chapter, Dean highlights "comrade" as a utopian ideal whose instantiation commits comrades to a common radical political horizon. **What is the role that history plays in elucidating a utopian ideal? Through what evidence can we conclude that "proletarian" is a masculinized while "comrade" remains a more generic and all-encompassing term? Must our vantage point be structures within particular party forms?**
  - b. Dean seems to imply that "comrade" encompasses changing notions and assumptions of gender. **Is "comrade" able to subsume these changing notions without itself changing? In other words, does "comrade" undergo a change to remain consistent with changing social views. How can we be confident that if such changes occur, that they will continue to occur as we bear truth to racialized, patriarchal capitalism? Must comrades do work to ensure that such changes occur, and if so, what work? And finally, what are the implications of the changing, historically contingent notion of comrade for Dean's utopian ideal "comrade?"**
- 3. The Right to Self-Determination:** The central thrust of the Black Belt Thesis is to regard African Americans as an oppressed people struggling for the right of self-determination, placing them as victims of imperialism in the American South. **What is the role of comradeship with the white working class, when African Americans are both outnumbered, and when the power imbalance is so great. What do comrades owe each other in the racist American society?**
- 4. The Kernel of Relationality:** Dean writes of *prochie*, "The miscellaneous lack a discernible Russian identity--their faces are international, faces from nomads and Mongolians. They lack militancy. They aren't organized, but their comradeship holds the place for something like a future. Their utter destitution has resulting not in atomized individuals isolated in egoistic self-interest but in comradeship as the zero-point of relationality necessary to continue." Here we find an interesting dimension to the notion of "comrade," not as the far-off and intangible ideal that can never be achieved, nor that which can only be rendered through party participation. Instead it is the most basic surviving relationship necessary to continue, when all else is lost. **What is the relationship between "comrade" as the grounds for minimum required relationality and "comrade" as the**

relation between members of the same revolutionary party? And what is the difference between the former notion of comrade and the neoliberal emphasis on *survival* under hostile conditions that Dean criticizes in the first chapter?

### Chapter 3:

**Note:** This chapter was closely adapted from [this essay](#) by Jodi Dean in e-flux, which is illustrated with her own sick memes.

- 1. A Community of Outsiders:** In our discussion on the first chapter, we discussed how comrades are often outsiders in their own communities. In Chapter 3, Dean highlights how the notion of comrade relies neither on “familial imagery” nor “proximity or shared sociality.” Others can perceive a shared commitment to struggle as destabilizing to hallowed notions of identity, family, and location, and therefore as inherently untrustworthy. **How should political organizers endeavor to build socialism in their own communities amidst mistrust from members of the community? How do comrades build trust with non-comrades? How do comrades turn non-comrades into comrades?**
- 2. Identity and History:** Dean writes about how the comrade relation wipes away the notion of distinction based on identity. **In light of the comrade’s commitment to internationalism, does the wholesale doing away of identity risk effacing a peoples’ actual history along with it?** One danger of utopian formations is the obstruction of actual political histories. I am thinking, for example, of culture-specific forms of oppression (such as caste in the Indian context) **and wonder about the proper role of international comradeship in combating them.**
- 3. Individual vs Party:** Dean identifies some ways in which the positive features of comradeship are twisted by our political enemies: **“Communists were depicted as puppets, cogs, automatons, robots, even slaves.”** In particular, “for anticommunists, the instrumentalism of comrade relations appears horrifying ... as if abstracted generic relations among those faithful to a political truth could only be the result of manipulation.” **How do we effectively combat such narratives in our own organizing, particularly as SoC turns toward more public-facing work, without sacrificing the unique features of the comrade-relation that they present such a distorted picture of?**
- 4. Dissidents as Comrades:** For someone closely associated with the Party for Socialism and Liberation and their Marxist-Leninist line, Jodi Dean’s choice of sources in this chapter is striking: Alexandra Kollontai, Maxim Gorky, George Orwell, Liu Shaoqi, Leon Trotsky. All were at one point or another notable dissenters from or outright enemies of the “party line” -- fatally so for the last two. **Why does Dean draw from such an ideologically heterodox group, and what does it suggest about how far the comrade-relation can be strained (and when it breaks)?**

### Chapter 4:

- 1. Takeaways:** **Now that we've finished reading the book, what are three main lessons or takeaways that you think we can use to further our work as SoC?**

- 2. Spontaneity:** Dean writes, “Disorganized leftists too often remain entranced by the illusion of everyday people spontaneously creating new forms of life that will usher in a glorious future. This illusion fails to acknowledge the deprivations and decapitations that forty years of neoliberalism have inflicted. If it were true that austerity, debt, the collapse of institutional infrastructures and capital flight could enable the spontaneous emergence of egalitarian forms of life, we would not see the enormous economic inequalities, intensification of racialized violence, declines in life expectancy, slow death, undrinkable water, contaminated soil, militarized policing and surveillance, and desolate urban and suburban neighborhoods that are now commonplace.” Every organization has a beginning, wherein people come together to begin the fight for a common struggle. Some organizations are born more spontaneously than others. How ought one organize such that “members” become “comrades,” so that individual political will is transformed into collective political action?
- 3. Resignation and Drift:** Contrast the two. What are the surface level similarities? How about the deeper similarities and differences? What possibilities do each of these forms of exit create for future political action?