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## **SUBMISSION TO *CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL THEORY***

### **Title:**

Radicalism Restored? Communism and the end of left melancholia (revised version after acceptance for publication)

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### **Abstract**

Since the onset of the 2008 economic crisis and the resurgence of various forms of transnational radical politics (the Arab Spring, Occupy etc), several left-wing thinkers have argued that the era of left melancholia is now over. This paper examines such claims, paying particular attention to the recent re-engagement with the idea of communism in contemporary critical theory. Foregrounding the recent work of Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek and (especially) Jodi Dean, I suggest that the attempt to re-invigorate and revitalise the academic left is welcome, but I question some of the political and theoretical investments that characterise this (re)turn to communism. In particular, I interrogate the new communists' tendency to contrast a vision of a melancholic and deradicalised left beholden to feminism, anti-racism, single issue politics and identity politics with an alternative vision of an authentically radical left emboldened by the re-emergence of the idea of communism. Such a distinction is not only analytically problematic, but also reflects, and shores up, a range of inequalities and exclusions within academic left theory and practice. These elisions, hierarchies and exclusions are, I argue, testament to much of the academic left's continued unease about, or even outright resistance to, feminism, anti-racism and queer politics. Overall, my intention is to trace some of the effects and consequences of the new communists' claim that they offer a newly radicalised left theory and politics: in so doing, I offer a preliminary rethinking of how we narrate the contemporary history of radical left politics.

**Key words:** melancholia; communism; feminism; intersectionality; identity politics; radicalism

**Word count:** 9,969 (including endnotes and references)

## **Radicalism Restored?**

### **Communism and the End of Left Melancholia**

Gloom, despair and melancholia have been the default affective settings for much of the Anglo-American left in recent decades (Brown, 1999; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Jodi Dean, 2012). For today's Anglophone and Western European lefts, however, things perhaps seem rather different. In the context of a historical moment marked by an apparent upsurge of mass protest movements, the time for left melancholia is perhaps over. The Occupy movement, the so-called "Arab Spring", reinvigorated student movements, the Indignado/as and other anti-austerity movements, new forms of feminist and sexual politics, have all, to some extent, served to engender a new found sense of hope in some areas of both popular and theoretical left discourse.<sup>1</sup>

My aim in this paper is to examine how recent accounts of the demise of left melancholia are narrated, and to raise some critical questions concerning the political and epistemological consequences of this change in orientation. In so doing, I pay particular attention to recent attempts by a number of prominent left thinkers to rethink and reaffirm the signifier "communism" as an antidote to left-wing malaise. Focussing especially on Jodi Dean's *The Communist Horizon*, I suggest that the attempt to revitalise the academic left is welcome, but I question some of the political and theoretical investments that characterise this (re)turn to communism. In particular, I argue that underpinning new communist discourse is a particular, and highly contestable, narrative of contemporary left politics. The story goes something like this: in recent decades, the left has become weak and ineffective as a result of having become in thrall to identity politics, multiculturalism and liberal democracy. However, the argument goes, the "idea of communism" has the potential to reorient the left away from its preoccupation with identitarian and single issue struggles, so as to restore to the academic left its radicalism and authenticity.

This narrative, whilst informed by a largely legitimate critique of reductionist forms of identity-based politics, too often spills over into a wider (illegitimate) marginalisation of questions of race, gender and sexuality. This arises from the new communists' claim that a recent turn to "identity politics" (and related signifiers) – often used as a tacit shorthand for

anti-heterosexist, feminist and anti-racist politics – has effected a *loss* of authentic left radicalism. Such claims should be read not just as (highly contestable) diagnoses of the left’s current ills, but as performative utterances that bring into being, and shore up, a range of inequalities and exclusions *within* academic left spaces. Furthermore, new communist narrations of the contemporary history of radical politics – far from offering a refreshing or novel account – in fact draw on a well-established repertoire of “stories” of left deradicalisation and fragmentation, in which feminism, anti-racism and queer politics are cast as the “bad guys”, responsible for sapping the left of its energy and efficacy.<sup>2</sup> In advancing such claims, my intention is to trace some of the effects and consequences of how left melancholia is framed, with a view to problematising and rethinking how we narrate the contemporary history of radical left politics.

To flesh out these claims, I begin with a brief overview of the various theorisations of left melancholia. I then explore some recent narrations of the apparent demise of left melancholia, affording particular attention to the efforts of authors such as Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Bruno Bosteels and (especially) Jodi Dean to reclaim and reaffirm the signifier “communism”. In so doing, I highlight three main difficulties that arise from the new communists’ characterisation of left melancholia, all of which relate to the question of how understandings of left melancholia inform conceptions of left radicalism. These are: first, a series of elisions and marginalisations of questions of race, gender and sexuality in new communist theoretical discourse; second, an insensitivity to hierarchy and privilege within the embodied practices of the new communism (and arguably the academic left more broadly), and third, an often dismissive inattention to potentially significant empirical instances of contemporary radical politics. I conclude by taking up Imogen Tyler’s recent (2013) call for a return to the critical vocabularies of the British cultural studies tradition, by offering a reframing of left melancholia, left radicalism and the recent history of left politics, informed by the neo-Gramscianism of Stuart Hall and Ernesto Laclau.

### **The contours of left melancholia**

The use of melancholia as an analytical category has its roots in Freudian psychoanalysis, and is to be distinguished from the related concept of mourning. For Freud, the latter refers to the

(non-pathological) process of working through an acknowledged 'loss of a loved person, or of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on' (Freud, 2001, p.243). Crucially, after a period of mourning is completed 'the ego becomes free and uninhibited again' (2001, p.243) but melancholia, by contrast, is 'related to an object loss that is withdrawn from consciousness' (2001, p.245) and as such it remains unacknowledged, enduring and intransigent. A number of authors have argued that Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia can help capture something specific about the affects and dispositions of the academic left. Wendy Brown's 1999 essay 'Resisting Left Melancholy' remains the standard-bearer. Drawing on Freud, Walter Benjamin and Stuart Hall, Brown argues that the left-wing melancholic is 'attached more to a particular political analysis or ideal – even to the failure of that ideal – than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present' (Brown, 1999, p.20). Left-wing melancholy, says Brown, 'signifies a certain narcissism with regard to one's past political attachments and identity that exceeds any contemporary investment in political mobilization, alliance or transformation' (1999, p.20). But what precisely is it that has brought about this pervasive left-wing melancholy? Brown's answer is twofold. First, she argues that the discourse of the left-wing melancholic frequently cites the turn to so-called "cultural politics" or "identity politics" – in which struggles around gender, race and sexuality are seen to have displaced the traditional focus on class – as having caused a crisis and loss of focus (1999, p.23). The second alleged culprit – in the eyes of the left-wing melancholic – is the turn to 'poststructuralism, discourse analysis, postmodernism, trendy literary theory got up as political analysis' (1999, p.23). Brown argues that this pervasive structure of left-wing melancholy, despite being based on an ostensible commitment to radical transformation, in fact engenders a conservative refusal to engage critically and constructively with the world. Instead, the left-wing melancholic takes refuge in his or her attachments to a lost ideal of traditional left theory and politics.

The crucial point for Wendy Brown is that the problems affecting the academic left do not – as the left-wing melancholic would have it – arise from the left's abandonment of its radical principles. Rather, this melancholia arises from many leftists' continued (often unacknowledged) attachments to a historically specific model of anti-capitalist revolutionary social change, whose privileged status is now called into question. Left-wing melancholia, for Brown, is therefore bound up with a generalised refusal or inability to respond to the challenges engendered by the changing nature of capitalism, and the emergence of various

forms of radical politics – feminism, queer politics, anti-racism etc – irreducible to historical materialist models of political transformation.<sup>3</sup>

Brown's text is notable for its lack of proper names, and as such melancholia is implicitly understood to refer to a collective, widely shared set of investments and orientations. This aspect of left melancholia is tackled in some detail in J.K. Gibson-Graham's (2006) analysis of the affects and emotions of the academic left. One of Gibson-Graham's central aims is to contest an entrenched mindset in which 'the accepted or correct "political" stance is one in which the emotional and affective dispositions of paranoia, melancholia, and moralism intermingle and self-reinforce' (2006, p. 4). Crucially, these negative affects are not located in particular individuals, but are a 'structure of feeling' (2006, p. 1) 'widely present if not fully manifest in any person or pronouncement' (2006, p. 6). Gibson-Graham suggest that these structures of feeling reduce the academic left to political paralysis, and also curtail our analytical capacities: left melancholia, they argue, reflects and reinforces rather crude, totalising renditions of capitalism as a pervasive and largely uncontested socio-economic formation. Consequently, complexities within capitalism, and socio-economic practices that diverge from – or indeed actively resist – capitalism, are downplayed, overlooked and cast to the margins, precluding the production of more nuanced framings of contemporary economic practices and social formations.

The thrust of Brown and Gibson-Graham's critical analyses of various aspects of left melancholia is not to suggest that those on the academic left should simply cheer up, or foster more positive affective orientations for the sake of it. Rather, their point is that melancholia – conceived as a specific kind of psychic formation different to, say, disappointment or sadness – hampers the academic left's ability to intervene politically, or to engage in fruitful socio-political analysis. Consequently, Gibson-Graham and others make a persuasive argument that an urgent task for the left is to explore how we might weaken the hold of melancholia.

### **The Idea of Communism: an antidote to left melancholia?**

If we accept – as I believe we should – Gibson-Graham's argument that left melancholia is worrying and problematic, then we can take heart from a number of recent political and

theoretical developments. Perhaps the most significant of these within left political theory and philosophy has been the recent return to the idea of communism. This (re)turn to communism – or the “new communism” as I shall call it hereafter – came to prominence by virtue of a well attended conference entitled ‘The Idea of Communism’ at Birkbeck College (London) in March 2009, organised by Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, and featuring a number of prominent figures on the contemporary academic left. Since then, there have been follow-up conferences in Berlin and New York as well as two edited books, and Verso have launched a Pocket Communism book series – featuring titles by, among others, Alain Badiou, Bruno Bosteels and Jodi Dean – which continues the theoretical conversations about the new communism that were set in motion at the Birkbeck conference.

But of what, precisely, does this (re)turn to communism consist? As the conversation has been spearheaded by a number of Marxist and neo-Marxist thinkers with divergent theoretical and political investments, it is far from unified. However, in its most general sense, the Idea of Communism both names and helps bring into existence a renewed appetite for radical emancipatory politics engendered by, among others, the economic crisis, the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement. According to Douzinas and Žižek (2010, p.vii), the ‘long night of the left is drawing to a close’ amidst ‘the revival of radical emancipatory politics all around the globe’ (Žižek, 2012, p.127), whilst Bruno Bosteels claims that a reaffirmation of “communism” will enable the left to ‘overcome its melancholic attachment to marginality’ (2012, p.239). Against this backdrop, the new communism seeks to disentangle the signifier “communism” from its associations with bureaucratic state socialism, and also tends to play down a traditional Hegelian Marxist understanding of communism as naming a future resolution of class antagonism. Instead, the emphasis tends to be on conceptualising communism – pace Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* – as denoting the real movement that abolishes the existing state of things (Žižek, 2010, p.211). In addition, communism is frequently linked to an emphasis on a notion of the common (in contradistinction to the public and/or private) whereby, as Michael Hardt puts it, communism ‘should be defined not only by the abolition of property but also by the affirmation of the common – the affirmation of open and autonomous biopolitical production, the self-governed continuous creation of new humanity’ (Hardt, 2010, p.144; see also Nancy, 2010).

However, beyond this rather thin consensus about the nature and purpose of the Idea of Communism, a number of disagreements emerge. Indeed, we can perhaps identify two rather

divergent strands of new communist thinking. One strand, associated primarily with Badiou (2010) – but which also finds favour with Peter Hallward (2010) – posits the Idea of Communism as an eternal invariant axiom that guides revolutionary politics: whilst it gets put into action in particular historical circumstances, it nonetheless persists over and above any particular, contingent instantiation. An implication of this is that for Badiou (2010, 2012) the Idea of Communism is not reducible to self-identified “communists”, and is not to be thought of as a qualifier for a particular kind of politics (as in a communist party), but rather it designates a generic capacity for radical egalitarian resistance, somewhat akin to a regulative ideal in the Kantian sense (Badiou, 2008, p.99).

With regards contemporary politics, Badiou affirms that recent decades have seen an all out assault on the Idea of Communism in the context of a retrenchment of what Badiou calls ‘capitalo-parliamentarism’, leading to an ‘intervallic period’ (2012, p.47) in which ‘lacking the Idea, the popular masses’ confusion is inescapable’ (2010, p. 258). Fortunately for Badiou, however, the 2010-12 uprisings in the Arab world (particularly in Egypt and Tunisia) potentially herald the end of this “intervallic period” and a rebirth of the Communist Idea (2012, p.6) even if, as is clear, the uprisings do not necessarily emerge under the signifier “communism”. As the title suggests, his recent book *The Rebirth of History* offers an unashamedly optimistic account of a ‘global popular uprising’ against the “regressions” of democracy, human rights, and the ‘unlimited power of a financial and imperial oligarchy’ (2012, p.6).

A second articulation of the “new communism” can be identified in the work of Jodi Dean (2012) and Slavoj Žižek (2012) who, despite their affinities with Badiou, depart from the latter by virtue of their unapologetic defence of the Leninist party form, and their much more explicit foregrounding of militant anti-capitalism. Jodi Dean’s *The Communist Horizon*, also part of the Verso Pocket Communism series, is a particularly striking contribution to the debate and her arguments are worth considering in some detail.<sup>4</sup> She engages extensively with Brown’s essay on left melancholia, and explicitly frames her articulation of communism as potentially providing an antidote to (a particular kind of) left melancholia. Her argument is in many respects quite simple: for a long time, she argues, the academic left (particularly in the US) has eschewed a militant anti-capitalism. This eschewal of militant anti-capitalism has, she argues, severely dampened the left’s political and analytical effectiveness. However, for Jodi Dean (as for Badiou) this period of malaise is coming to an end as, amidst the



emergence of Occupy and other mass protest movements, the “communist horizon” is coming back into view.

With communism as our horizon, Dean argues, ‘barriers to action fall away. New potentials and challenges come to the fore. Anything is possible’ (2012, p.11). More specifically, ‘instead of a politics thought primarily in terms of resistance, playful and momentary aesthetic disruptions, the immediate specificity of local projects, and struggles for hegemony within a capitalist parliamentary setting, the communist horizon impresses upon us the necessity to abolish capitalism and to create global practices and institutions of egalitarian cooperation’ (2012, p.11). After a period of directionless caused by the ‘loss of communism as a name for left aspiration’, this return to communism entails a shift away from ‘general inclusion, momentary calls for broad awareness, and lifestyle changes, and toward militant opposition, tight organisational forms (party, council, working group, cell), and the sovereignty of the people over the economy through which we produce and reproduce ourselves’ (2012, p.12). Jodi Dean is clear that this reorientation of the left towards the communist horizon marks ‘an end to left melancholia’ (2012, p.205) and with it a revitalisation and re-radicalising of a hitherto directionless left.

### **The sources of left melancholia**

What particularly interests me about the new communism is not so much the substantive content of various authors’ articulations of the communist idea, but the different ways in which the new communism is narrated as marking a shift beyond left melancholia. For despite theoretical differences concerning, for example, the status of the communist idea, the role of the party, and the centrality or otherwise of anti-capitalism, Bosteels, Badiou, Žižek and Jodi Dean converge in their framing of the new communism as holding out the possibility – if not the actuality – of a restored radicalism and an end to left melancholia. The aim of this section, then, is to pinpoint precisely how the various new communist authors account for the malaise and melancholia which – it is claimed – has afflicted the left in recent decades. To do this, I shall explore the answers offered by first Jodi Dean, then Badiou, and finally Žižek.

Jodi Dean offers a distinctive account of left melancholia, putting her somewhat at odds with Brown, Gibson-Graham and others. Indeed, Jodi Dean claims that Brown's account is based on a misreading of Walter Benjamin. Whereas Brown's Benjamin frames left melancholy as a consequence of a dogged, unflinching attachment to a lost ideal of left politics, Dean's Benjamin sees left melancholy as arising from 'intellectual compromise, adaptation to the market, and the betrayal of the worker's movement, particularly insofar as this compromise, adaptation, and betrayal banks on and cans authentic revolutionary impulses already part of everyday proletarian life' (Jodi Dean, 2012, p.160). Brown's left melancholic thus laments the passing of a lost ideal of radical class politics in the context of a turn to feminism, anti-racism, identity politics, poststructuralism, cultural studies etc. For Dean, by contrast, left melancholia inheres in the melancholic accommodation with capitalism implied by the turn to forms of progressive politics other than anti-capitalism. She frames Benjamin's left melancholic as one who 'sublimates left commitment to revolution and the proletariat, giving way to the bourgeois vision of the existing world instead of holding fast to revolutionary struggle' (2012, p.162). Consequently, Jodi Dean counterposes her defence of the communist horizon with a vision of a melancholic left in thrall to 'issue politics, identity politics, and their own fragmentation into a multitude of singularities' (2012, p.53) and thus compromised by a disappearance of authentic left radicalism.

For Badiou, the left's recent malaise simply reflects the dominance of 'capitalo-parliamentarianism' consisting of 'the capitalist economy, the constitutional form of government, the laws (in the juridical sense) concerning property and inheritance, the army, the police...' (2010, p.243), coupled with a proliferation of particularistic, identity-based forms of power and politics. The latter, says Badiou, potentially 'enables the state to separate certain groups from the collectivity, who therefore call for particular repressive measures' (2012, p. 92). Characteristic of the Idea of Communism, then, is an emphasis on *genericity* in contrast to the division and separation that characterises the logic of the state: 'we must affirm', writes Badiou, 'the generic, universal and never identitarian character of any political truth. This involves dispelling, through the real consequences of a choice of truth, the fiction of the identitarian object' (2012, p. 77). Thus, the main antagonism in Badiou's recent work is that between the Idea of Communism, on the one hand, and the divisive capitalo-parliamentarian forces of reaction on the other.

Žižek, by contrast, and much like Jodi Dean, frames his articulation of communism in opposition to particular kinds of *left* politics as well as in opposition to dominant socio-political formations. Indeed, both Dean and Žižek narrate a recent shift from an unfocused and melancholic left to a newly radicalised left emboldened by the re-emergence of the communist horizon. A range of different signifiers are used to characterise the left's recent malaise – multiculturalism, deconstruction, democracy, issue politics, identity politics, the 'archetypal left-liberal moron' (Žižek, 2012, p.12) – but all are read as symptomatic of a melancholic left that has accommodated itself to the (neo)liberal democratic status quo, having abandoned any genuine commitment to radical egalitarian struggle. This re-radicalisation of the left is thus narrated as a turning of the tables whereby the hitherto marginal radical anti-capitalism takes up its rightful place at the helm of left politics at the expense of "identity politics" and associated evils. For instance, in a passage where he is at his most stridently orthodox Marxist, Žižek argues that 'after abandoning so-called "class struggle essentialism" for the plurality of anti-racist, feminist and other struggles, "capitalism" is now clearly re-emerging as the name of the problem' (2012, p.77). To reiterate, then, Žižek, Badiou and Jodi Dean – despite their differences – converge in their conviction that the idea of communism displaces and decentres the left's alleged preoccupation with identity politics, issue politics and multiculturalism, and this in turn will restore radicalism and authenticity to the academic left.

### **The Idea of Communism and gender/race/sexuality**

To some extent, this unease about the left's turn to "identity politics", multiculturalism etc is well founded. As Wendy Brown (1995) herself powerfully argued back in the mid 1990s, some iterations of social movement politics in the US risk essentialising and ossifying particular identity categories. When those categories have been historically marginalised, political claims on behalf of a particular group therefore risk reinscribing and exacerbating the histories of injury, pain and marginalisation associated with that particular group. Likewise, Linda Zerilli (2005) has made a compelling argument highlighting how the constitution of identity and subjectivity as a ground for political claims results in a marginalisation of the freedom and contingency fundamental to political action. Thus, at the very least, identity-based forms of social movement politics can prove problematic under particular circumstances. However, my worry is that the new communists do not distinguish

with sufficient rigour between, on the one hand, particularistic, identitarian forms of movement politics that exhibit the kinds of problems identified by Brown and Zerilli and, on the other hand, feminism, anti-racism and anti-heterosexist politics *tout court*. In a context where, as Nancy Fraser has argued, ‘the expression ‘identity politics’ is increasingly used as a derogatory term for feminism, anti-racism and anti-heterosexism’ (Fraser, quoted in Butler, 1998, p.39), we need to be alert to the possibility that the new communists’ critique of “identitarian” forms of politics expands beyond sound criticism of *particular* forms of social movement practice to encompass a wider marginalisation of feminism, anti-racism and anti-heterosexism.

Indeed, upon further examination, it appears that these concerns are well founded. At best, the new communism has little to say about struggles against sexism, racism and heterosexism; at worst, the new communism’s restored radicalism is seen to derive precisely from its rejection of the melancholic accommodation with capitalism which these struggles allegedly bring about. For instance, Žižek – as we saw in the quotes above – is explicit in his privileging of anti-capitalism over and above feminism and anti-racism, the latter of which fail to embody the ‘concrete universality’ of the class struggle (2012, p.33). He argues that ‘while anti-racist and anti-sexist struggles are guided by a striving for a full recognition of the other, the class struggle aims at overcoming, at subduing, annihilating even, the other – even if not a direct physical annihilation, it aims at wiping out the other’s socio-political role and function’ (Žižek, 2012, p.34). Such an argument need not mean that Žižek is straightforwardly “anti-feminist”: indeed, in a recent publication (Žižek, 2013, p. 189), he talks approvingly about processes of feminist subjectification. And one could also legitimately claim that Žižek’s status as a self-styled provocateur could mean we should perhaps not take his utterances too literally. However, his framing of feminism and anti-racism as lacking the antagonistic radicalism of communism and militant anti-capitalism is unambiguous, reflecting a longstanding unease about the role and status of feminism, anti-racism and queer/LGBT politics on the radical left.

Similarly, whilst Jodi Dean is in no sense “anti-feminist”, given her impressive track record within feminist political theory (see, in particular, Dean, 1996), feminism assumes a curiously spectral status within her articulation of the communist horizon. Indeed, at no point does she offer a sustained discussion of the status of anti-sexism – or indeed anti-racism – within the communist horizon. Furthermore, a passing comment against the left’s propensity

for what she calls ‘perpetual self-surveillance’ (Jodi Dean, 2012, p. 175) brings to mind the kinds of arguments that some on the left often use to deflect examination of their own hierarchies and exclusions. Thus, the arguments advanced in *The Communist Horizon* provide us with little by way of theoretical tools with which to challenge the marginalisation of feminism within the academic left, or sexism in wider society.

Anti-racism also assumes a similarly marginal status in Dean and Žižek’s work. Badiou, however – whilst remaining impervious to any kind of engagement with questions of feminism and gender<sup>5</sup> – is more overtly sympathetic to anti-racism, and frames his defence of communist “genericity” in opposition to the use of the “separating names” (2012, p.77) characteristic of Islamophobic discourse. And Badiou has himself been active in struggles in support of the “sans-papiers” in France (2008, esp. pp.53-70).

Struggles against heteronormativity and homophobia, however, assume an even more ambiguous status in “new communist” discourses. In principle, some strands of sexual politics – particularly the more radical manifestations of queer politics – with their emphasis on the disruption of identitarian modes of sexual expression, regulation and political activism (see Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 1993) resonate with the new communists’ critique of what Badiou calls “identitarian names”.<sup>6</sup> In practice, however, sexuality barely figures in new communist discourse, with the exception of some interesting recent remarks from Žižek (2013) about right-wing nationalist attacks on LGBT pride parades in Serbia and Croatia. This silence on questions of sexuality does little to dispel the suspicion that, in keeping with much of the mainstream left, the politics of sexuality is framed as a fringe concern for the academic and activist left. This in turn suggests that the new communism goes beyond a (justified) scepticism of specific kinds of particularistic and/or identitarian forms of politics: indeed, what we have is a wider reluctance or refusal to engage with questions of race, gender and sexuality, in which at times the new communists’ restored radicalism is seen to derive precisely from their antipathy towards these kinds of questions. The rest of the paper shall argue that this should be read less as restoration of authentic left radicalism, and more as a shoring up of a range of hierarchies and exclusions within academic left theory and practice.

### **Radicalism restored or hierarchies reasserted?**

So far, I have argued that despite theoretical differences, the new communists all posit the Idea of Communism as offering an antidote to a melancholic and de-radicalised left. This narrative – which, I would argue, is a new spin a familiar narrative of post-1968 loss, marginalisation and fragmentation (Jonathan Dean, 2014) – yields a number of highly problematic effects. In this section, I highlight three particularly troubling implications of this narrative, and flesh out some of the wider implications of my recasting of left melancholia.

### *Reframing race, gender and sexuality*

First, recall my argument that new communist discourse serves, intentionally or otherwise, to cast gender, race and sexuality as marginal to an authentic radical politics. I intimated that such a view is problematic, but we need to be clear about precisely why this is so. Specifically, such a view is questionable in part because it risks domesticating or overlooking the radicalism and diversity of the various theoretical interventions that seek to foreground race, gender and sexuality as sites of power, inequality and regulation. Consider, for instance, queer theory. As Butler (1998, p.38) has argued, ‘considered inessential to what is most pressing in material life, queer politics is regularly figured by the orthodoxy as the cultural extreme of politicization’. Although, as we saw, such a view is never explicitly stated within the new communist literature, the silences around issues of sexuality do little to displace the sense that sexuality is framed as ‘inessential’ to an authentic emancipatory politics. From a queer theoretical perspective, however, any politics inattentive to the pervasiveness of heterosexual norms will be seriously limited in its radicalism.

To substantiate this claim we could, following Butler, highlight the interconnectedness between the economic and the sexual, emphasising the ways in which the capitalist economy shores up the heterosexual family unit. A second strategy might be to suggest that – contra the framing of sexual politics as ephemeral – queer theory and politics, exemplified in the work of authors such as Butler (1999) and Sedgwick (1990), names, theorises and contests structures of power that are pervasive, widespread and regulatory of all spheres of the social, and thus irreducible to liberal notions of identity politics. As Sam Chambers (2007) compellingly argues, the concept of heteronormativity in contemporary queer politics precisely names the latter’s distance from a liberal problematic of discrimination enacted by

autonomous choosing subjects against individuals on account of particular identity traits. Heteronormativity – in contrast to homophobia – is a regulatory practice which ‘can appear as an edict or law, but... usually functions much more subtly through societal expectation, peer pressure, propriety (i.e. as a norm)’ (2007, p.662). Much contemporary queer theory and activism is thus focussed not on advancing the interests of one particular sexual minority within the discursive parameters of liberal democratic capitalism. Rather, queer politics aims at contesting pervasive, entrenched regulatory mechanisms, such as the gendered division of labour and the multiple ways in which both informal social norms and the codified power of the state serve to demarcate the boundaries between those bodies and sexualities that are cast as normal, acceptable and intelligible, and those cast as deviant and/or unintelligible. As Chambers argues, ‘Heteronormativity might be taken, then, as a concept that parallels that of whiteness: both call attention to seemingly invisible problems of sedimented and ingrained privilege that need to be subverted’ (2007, p666). Consequently, an anti-heteronormative politics is *radical* in the literal sense of getting to the root of the power structures and norms that shape our everyday practices. This suggests that to consider a politics of sexuality as symptomatic of a melancholic loss of radicalism – or at best to remain silent on the issue – is problematic, and likely to reflect a largely unexamined heteronormativity within new communist discourse.

Indeed, a similar set of problems arise in relation to several other strands of theory and politics which the new communists accuse of engendering a sense of melancholia and malaise on the academic left. Let us take, for instance, bell hooks’ *Ain’t I a Woman?* – a key touchstone in anti-racist feminism and in the recent turn to “intersectionality” in contemporary feminist and critical race theory (Crenshaw, 1993; K. Davis, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Far from being compromised by a melancholic complicity with liberal democracy, bell hooks’ text is a rigorous and relentlessly radical account of the violence of racism, sexism and classism in twentieth century America. In her dogged analysis of the racism of mainstream feminism, and the sexism of anti-racism, hooks outlines how no other group have had their identity ‘socialised out of existence’ as much as black women (hooks, 1981, p.7). A clear implication of hooks’ account is that any radical politics unable or unwilling to acknowledge, and grapple with, the intersecting nature of different vectors of power, will of necessity enact precisely the kinds of violences and exclusions that egalitarian forms of politics are ostensibly committed to overthrowing. In so doing, she is unremittingly critical of mainstream liberal politics. She writes:

Freedom (and by that term I do not mean to evoke some wishy-washy hang-loose do-as-you-like world) as positive social equality that grants all humans the opportunity to shape their destinies in the most healthy and communally productive way can only be a complete reality when our world is no longer racist or sexist (1981, p.117)

The similarity between hooks' rhetoric and that of the new communism is striking, with its emphasis on the 'common' and 'positive social equality', and its scathing critique of mainstream liberal conceptions of freedom. The radicalism of her critique of the intersections of classism, racism and patriarchy, and the inegalitarian distribution of roles and functions that these shore up – a critique that informs a vast swathe of contemporary intersectional feminist theorising – brings out the absurdity of Žižek's claim that it is only radical class politics that 'aims at wiping out the other's socio-political role and function' (2012, p.34).

## 2) *Whiteness and hegemonic masculinity on the academic left*

Secondly, the use of "identity politics" and related signifiers as pejoratives – and the unease about race, gender and sexuality it both reflects and generates – risks shoring up troublesome hierarchies within the embodied spaces and practices at the academic left. To explain: at face value, the new communists' accounts of left melancholia are simply descriptive diagnoses of a specific moment in the history of the left. However, we could perhaps also read the linking of left melancholia to feminism/anti-racism/sexual politics as *performative*, such that feminism, anti-racism etc. are not simply described, but are *discursively constituted* as responsible for various ills afflicting the academic left. Such a move has a range of clear effects: it repositions the (non-feminist) communist as the privileged subject of radical political transformation, and pre-empts possible challenges to the masculinism, whiteness and heteronormativity of various academic left communities by framing such challenges as merely "identitarian". Indeed, as James Clifford argues, drawing on George Lipsitz:

opposition to the special claims of racial or ethnic minorities [and indeed sexual minorities] often masks another, unmarked 'identity politics', and actively sustained historical positioning and possessive investment in Whiteness. This defensive response, most aggressively mobilised by the Right, in fact spans the political spectrum. It thus behoves those of us on the Left to be especially wary of any absolute, self-righteous opposition to identity claims (1999, p.97).



In another context, Sara Ahmed has noted that the most defensive reactions she has encountered to the flagging up of sexism and racism in academic settings has been from ‘white male academics who think of themselves as “critical”’ (2012, loc 3201). To illustrate, Ahmed describes on occasion where a “critical” academic deflected questions of racism and sexism by framing these as a “very 1980s” form of “identity politics” which, in his view, was something to be “got over” (2012, loc 3201). Thus, whilst the new communism purports to offer a revitalisation of left radicalism and an end to left melancholia, from this perspective the new communism looks more like a *reassertion* of a rather traditional and exclusionary rendering of left politics. Indeed, the arguments of Ahmed and Clifford might suggest that the new communists’ totalising opposition to “identity politics” – particularly when combined with the assumption that to be a radical and critical scholar is to be egalitarian by definition – forecloses any kind of examination of critical scholars and activists’ own complicity in the reproduction of racialised and gendered hierarchies.

Sara Ahmed’s remarks indicate that defensive responses to questions of gender and race operate partly – indeed perhaps primarily – through the embodied practices of the activist and academic left rather than at the level of the published academic text. This line of argument is further supported by my experience of attending the ‘On the Idea of Communism’ conference at Birkbeck College, London, in March 2009 (mentioned earlier). At the conference, myself and several other delegates expressed unease with the deeply masculinised norms of speech, conduct and interaction at the conference, and the almost total silence on issues of race, gender and sexuality. Our unease was further reinforced by the celebrity rockstar-like status that seemed to be afforded to the some of the speakers and the almost total absence of women speakers (Judith Balso was the only woman out of a total of fourteen). Indeed, this did not pass unnoticed: several interventions commented on the marginalisation of women (including claims that chairs seemed reluctant to allow women delegates the chance to put forward questions from the floor), and prior to the event a subversive “re-imagining” of the conference programme began to circulate online. This “updated” programme parodically drew attention to the almost total absence of women speakers by adding various high-profile feminists such as Nancy Hartsock, Angela Davis, Donna Harraway, Sheila Rowbotham and bell hooks (giving a paper called “Ain’t I a communist?”) to the programme, as well as sardonically rewording paper titles (Žižek’s was rechristened “The view from up here: communism from above is no communism at all”). The selective character of the programme

was also highlighted by the statement “Jean-Luc Nancy, Christine Delphy and members of migrant and feminist groups will be present throughout the conference and will intervene in the discussions” (in the original version the statement only applied to Jean-Luc Nancy).<sup>7</sup> Clearly, the “alternative” conference programme sought to bring into focus the largely uncritical investments in hegemonic masculinity<sup>8</sup> that marked the conference space (and arguably also wider sections of the academic left), as well as drawing attention to the marginalisation of women as participants, and feminism, postcolonial theory, queer theory and anti-racism as intellectual and political concerns.

These unreflective investments in hegemonically masculinised notions of academic left subjectivity arguably reflect wider logics of disciplinary power within sections of the academic and activist left. For instance, a recent article by Coleman and Bassi (2011) provides a feminist ethnographic account of the performance of masculinity in anarchist and anti-globalisation activist spaces. They note that activist spaces were frequently dominated by the enactment of a kind of authoritative masculinity similar to those on display at the Birkbeck communism conference. They dub this kind of authoritative masculine subjectivity the “Man With Analysis” – ‘characterised by ‘black and white’ reasoning about objective matters, with little room for self-doubt in claims to knowledge, or for reason to be coloured by emotion’ (Coleman & Bassi, 2011, p. 211). Taking Coleman and Bassi’s lead, I want to suggest that the gendered pronouncements and practices of the new communism risk foreclosure of a critical engagement with the gender politics of academic spaces, by embodying conventionally masculine forms of certitude and confidence, and disavowing the uncertainties that might be engendered through an engagement with, say, feminism or queer theory. This, I would argue, lends weight to the suspicion that the shuffling of feminism/anti-racism/queer politics to the margins is not simply either an oversight or a mere tactical consideration: rather, it suggests that gender hierarchy, heteronormativity and racial privilege are *constitutive* exclusions that structure the discursive parameters of the new communism (and perhaps other parts of the academic left).<sup>9</sup> A particular irony of this situation is that the figure of the “Man With Analysis” – whose radicalism and authenticity are seen to derive in part from his vocal opposition to identity politics – is itself predicated upon the cultivation of a specific kind of identity and presentation of self.<sup>10</sup>

To be clear, the problem here is less to do with the intentionality of specific individuals (many of whom, including Jodi Dean and many “new communist” men, would likely oppose

the insinuation that they are in some way hostile to feminism), and more to do with the wider cultures and norms of the academic left. The crucial point is that in a context in which, as Coleman and Bassi argue and the Birkbeck conference testifies, the academic left remains shot through with a range of gendered and racialised exclusions and hierarchies, we urgently need to develop the kinds of critical vocabularies that will enable and foster what Lynne Segal (2013, p. 68-69). calls ‘constant vigilance’ toward the ‘stubborn persistence of old hierarchies’ within the academic left.

### 3) *Beyond narratives of loss and restoration*

Thirdly, the narrative that the new communists advance – in which a protracted period of political quietude is brought to an end by the re-emergence of the communist idea – clearly serves to overlook and marginalise a number of potentially significant recent and ongoing forms of political protest, activism and resistance. It prompts us to ask: what forms of resistance do we overlook by casting the forty year period from 1968 to 2008 as “intervallic”? And what gets missed when we focus our attention on militant anti-capitalism as *the* mode of radical politics *par excellence* in the present? To pose such questions is to invite scepticism towards the tendency among the new communists to draw often rather rigid demarcations between those kinds of politics that are seen to “count” as authentically radical, and those that are seen as symptomatic of a melancholic complicity with liberal democracy. A more fruitful approach – perhaps broadly genealogical in orientation – would be one that seeks to uncover and examine those forms of radical activism which dominant narratives risk silencing and/or marginalising. We could, for instance, highlight Jessica Taft’s (2011) ethnographic analysis of radical left activism by teenage girls in North and South Americas, which seeks to bring to light those forms of activism by young women and girls which often slip below the gendered and generational assumptions that inform hegemonic accounts of radical politics.

Alternatively, Redfern and Aune (2010) and Eschle and Manguashca (2010), in documenting feminist activism within contemporary Britain and the anti-globalisation movement respectively, both seek to affirm moments of feminist resistance that are overlooked by dominant narratives of young women’s disengagement with feminism, and gender blind analyses of the politics and practice of the World Social Forums.

In a not dissimilar vein, Imogen Tyler (2013) has sought to map the contours of the social and cultural parameters of neoliberalism in contemporary Britain, emphasising the pernicious effects of neoliberal governmentalities, as well as analysing and valorising various modes of resistance. These include the protests against the eviction of members of the Gypsy and Traveller communities from their homes in Dale Farm, Essex, and a series of naked protests against the maltreatment of women at the Yarl's Wood Immigration Removal Centre in the south of England. Tyler's account is informed by a critical engagement with the Kristevan notion of abjection, as well as the British cultural studies tradition, and seeks to pursue the twin strategy of mapping how consent for entrenched neoliberalism is secured, whilst also foregrounding 'moments of capture and revolt' (Tyler, 2013, p.12). Tyler concedes that this risks 'fetishising 'the event' by inflating the meaning and potential of protests as moments of political hope for the future' (Tyler, 2013, p.12). However, her analysis is not merely celebratory: rather, it aims to shine a light on a variety of forms of often rather localised, small scale modes of resistance, whilst not shying away from the extent and severity of neoliberal hegemony. Such an approach manages to caution against the twin extremes of either uncritical endorsement or outright dismissal of emergent forms of protest and radical politics. In so doing, her work could be read as implying that the triumphalism that peppers the discourse of the new communists is simply a mirror image of the impotence of the left melancholic. Tyler, by contrast, seeks to cultivate a sensitivity towards emergent forms of protest and radical politics, making a refreshing contrast to the oscillations between despair and triumphalism that mark much of the new communism and the wider academic left.

Overall, what is striking is the ways in which new communist narratives – and the characterisations of “identity politics” that underpin them – proceed not through careful analysis of their objects of critique, but through the invocation of a familiar repertoire of shared stories about the left's present and recent past. This strategy – which Clare Hemmings' (2011) identifies as being widely present in feminist theory and in contemporary social theory more broadly – risks reproducing rather crude and totalising grand narratives. Such narratives potentially perpetuate a range of problematic erasures, exclusions and simplifications, emphasising the capacity for ostensibly “critical” academics to be complicit in the maintenance of structures of power and privilege.

## **Conclusion: Rethinking left melancholia**

I began by framing a debate between two competing conceptions of left melancholia. One approach, associated with Wendy Brown and J.K. Gibson-Graham, holds that left melancholia arises from problematic attachments to a lost ideal of revolutionary class politics. A second approach, associated with Jodi Dean, holds that left melancholia arises precisely from the left's alleged retreat from a revolutionary model of (anti-capitalist) politics. However, the subsequent analysis suggested that we are perhaps dealing not primarily with competing notions of left melancholia, but with competing understandings of left radicalism and authenticity, which in turn give rise to different conceptualisations of left melancholia. A key difference is that, for the new communists, the left's increasing attention to feminism, anti-racism and sexual politics has effected a *loss* of radicalism and efficacy. By contrast, for feminists and post-marxists, it is a failure or refusal to engage with these "non-class" forms of politics that engenders a lack of radicalism and effectiveness. This is not to say that the new communists are explicitly anti-feminist (let alone racist or homophobic), but that their narrative of the contemporary history of radical politics betrays a continued unease about feminism, anti-heterosexism and anti-racism.

However, a few caveats need to be added. First, I am not arguing for an abandonment of radical anti-capitalism, nor am I suggesting that the crisis of revolutionary class politics has been unproblematic. Rather, I aim to contest a hierarchical model of left politics in which class struggles – or a more formalistic rendering of the "communist hypothesis" *à la* Badiou – are afforded a necessary priority over feminism, anti-racism and anti-heterosexim. Second, I do not intend to claim that all feminist and anti-racist struggles are innocent of the problems associated with "identity politics": what I object to is the use of pejorative terms such as "identity politics" as shorthand for feminism, anti-racism and queer politics *tout court*. Third, I do not intend to argue that certain forms of loss, yearning and nostalgia are necessarily bad or problematic for a left politics. I acknowledge with Alistair Bonnett (2010) that nostalgia can be a productive and motivating force for the left: what I want to contest is a specific instantiation of left melancholia at a particular historical moment.

The argument I *am* making is in many respects an old-one. It is an argument against the well-worn tendency on the left to establish hierarchies between different practices and sites of struggle, and against the tendency to link left melancholia to an engagement with questions of

race, gender and sexuality.<sup>11</sup> Rather than casting particular moments or forms of politics as straightforwardly or intrinsically “melancholic”, we should instead explore the different ways in which melancholia and affective states such as hope, pessimism and anger emerge and interact in complex ways under particular historical circumstances.

This argument is informed by a neo-Gramscian perspective – situated somewhere between Stuart Hall’s politics “without guarantees” and Laclau and Mouffe’s “post-marxism without apologies”. These approaches, I would argue, offer a more attractive account of contemporary left radicalism than that offered by the new communists. Indeed, Imogen Tyler ends *Revolting Subjects* with a call for ‘an unabashed return to the critical vocabularies, energy and oppositional politics that shaped the emergence of cultural studies as a field of study’ (2013, p.215), and we would be well advised to heed her call. The appeal of such an approach lies in its radicalisation of Gramsci’s emphasis on the contingency and unpredictability of (counter) hegemonic struggle, so as to argue that radical emancipatory politics no longer has any *a priori* connection to any one site (such as the factory or the city square), issue (such as the distribution of material wealth), or axis of antagonism (such as that between worker and capitalist) (Hall, 1988; 1992; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; 1987). Such a view also cautions against the kinds of homogenising narratives of the loss and return of radical politics that one finds in the new communist writing. Instead, neo-Gramscianism emphasises the discursive mediation between a plurality of different histories and sites of struggle and antagonism, none of which can be said to have absolute ontological primacy.

The Gramscian tradition has, however, come under criticism in recent years: for example, from a broadly Deleuzian perspective Simon Tormey (2006) argues that Laclau’s approach legitimises a violently hierarchical form of representational politics, whilst Žižek (2000) famously argued that the pluralism of Laclau’s post-marxism renders it irredeemably complicit with liberal democratic capitalism. Despite these criticisms, I want to suggest that the appeal of neo-Gramscian/post-marxism lies in the fact that, in contrast to the new communists’ incredulity or awkward silence on the potentially disruptive questions of race, gender and sexuality, Laclau and Hall integrate these questions into the core of their theoretical analysis. As Hall puts it:

arenas of contestation which may appear, to a more orthodox or conventional reading, to be ‘marginal’ to the main question, acquire a perspective in the analysis of

‘hegemony’, an absolute centrality: questions about moral conduct, about gender and sexuality, about race and ethnicity, about ecological and environmental issues, about cultural and national identity (1988, p.8).

In so doing, Hall and Laclau and Mouffe’s neo-Gramscian accounts of radical politics give a flavour of what it might mean to acknowledge the radicalism of the challenge implied by struggles around gender, race and sexuality. Thus, from a neo-Gramscian (and indeed intersectional perspective), the radical politicisation of race, gender and sexuality in the late twentieth century looks less like a melancholic accommodation with capitalism, and more like a lively, radical and highly challenging proliferation of sites of political contestation.

More normatively and indeed practically, this calls for a politics that rejects the tired yet familiar tendency on both the academic and activist left to pitch anti-capitalist against feminism, queer politics and anti-racism. Indeed, there are small but hopeful signs that such an approach is starting to gain some traction on the activist left in the UK. Recently, spurred on by the fallout from a series of allegations of sexual violence against a senior male member of the British Socialist Workers’ Party, there have emerged a range of attempts, particularly among younger activists, to posit autonomous organising by oppressed groups (in relation to gender, race, sexuality, disability etc) as integral to radical left politics. Similarly, the recent formation of Left Unity (an attempt to establish an electoral presence on the radical left in the UK) was notable for its passing of a resolution guaranteeing a 50/50 gender split on all representative bodies within the organisation.<sup>12</sup> Of course, these are small and anecdotal examples, but they are indicative of the kinds of politics that might emerge from a more rigorous foregrounding of the arguments and insights offered by feminist theory, intersectional theory, post-marxism and cultural studies.

To be clear, none of this is to suggest that a simple “adoption” of either Hall or Laclau’s post-marxism will solve all the academic left’s problems: indeed, their initial defence of a neo-Gramscian approach in the 1980s emerged in a very specific set of conjunctural circumstances (Gilbert, 2008). And neither is it to suggest that the fields of cultural studies and post-marxism inspired by Hall and Laclau respectively are wholly unproblematic from a feminist, anti-racist or queer perspective. Indeed, Laclau’s later work (2014) shifted towards a more formal reflection on the ontological categories that inform his analysis of political struggle, in which the influence of his earlier engagement with the challenge of the “new social movements” has become harder to locate. However, the broad spirit and ethos of Hall

and Laclau's theorising is something that academic (and indeed activist) left communities can continue to draw sustenance from. Their work suggests that a weakening of the tendency towards melancholia is urgent and necessary, but not if this move away from melancholia entails a restoration of precisely the kinds of political and epistemic hierarchies that critical theorists should, in principle, seek to call into question.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Mason (2012), Bloom (2012) and Castells (2012), as well as *Time* magazine's decision to name "the protestor" as its person of the year for 2011.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Hobsbawm (1996), Geras (1987), Fraser (1995). For a critique of such narratives, see Dean (2014).

<sup>3</sup> See Özseltük (2006, p.226) and Roy (2009) for case studies that use Brown's formulation of left melancholia to account for a range of problems and difficulties affecting (respectively) an anti-privatisation movement in Turkey, and the women's movement in India.

<sup>4</sup> For the avoidance of doubt, Jodi Dean and I are not related!

<sup>5</sup> With the possible exception of a dismissive reference to "feminism" as a key element of what "the State" believes constitutes the average French citizen (Badiou, 2012, p.73).

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, see Chambers (2009) for an account of a range of productive overlaps between queer theory and the work of Jacques Rancière (2010), who has made important contributions to recent debates about the idea of communism. As Chambers points out, both Rancière and queer theory foreground a politics centred upon the disruption of socially prescribed roles and identities.

<sup>7</sup> The alternative conference programme can be accessed here:

<http://thecomune.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/communismprogramme11.pdf>. I was unable to find a copy of the "proper" version anywhere online.

<sup>8</sup> My understanding of hegemonic masculinity in this context is derived from the work of Connell and Messerschmidt (2005).

<sup>9</sup> See also Ahmed (2012), Pereira (2012) and New and Fleetwood (2006) for accounts of how gendered and other kinds of hierarchies are operative in ostensibly egalitarian academic spaces.

<sup>10</sup> I would like to thank Tom Walker for drawing my attention to this point.

<sup>11</sup> See Eschle and Maiguashca (2013) and Dean (2008) for similar lines of argument.

<sup>12</sup> For a commentary on this see here:

[http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article\\_comments/left\\_unity\\_a\\_report\\_from\\_the\\_founding\\_conference](http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/left_unity_a_report_from_the_founding_conference).



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