



' **Communicative Capitalism** :
this is what democracy looks like'
Public Lecture by Professor Jodi Dean
At International Anthony Burgess Foundation
Reviewed by Simon Belt March 2011

Professor Jodi Dean of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, New York had been invited by **Professor Berthold Schoene**

and The Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences Research (IHSSR) at Manchester Metropolitan University for a week of discussions and a headline Public Lecture entitled '**Communicative Capitalism: this is what democracy looks like**

'. Prior to this lecture, I managed to join Jodi when she led a research workshop on the chapter entitled '

Technology: The Promises of Communicative Capitalism

' from her book '

Democracy and other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics

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I've been involved with networked PC environments for the last couple of decades, and focussed on internet and collaborative communication technologies for the last 5 years, so the research workshop on technology and democracy was a particularly interesting prospect for me. Having also been around erstwhile progressive types whilst they intellectually collapsed when the Thatcher era of the 1980's sent them packing, I had come across many attempts to blame technology for breaking up working class industries or social life - be it the dreaded walkman,

TV or cheap mass produced red tops in the Murdoch stable. I thought I should see how this fetishising of technology may have moved on, and what was being discussed in academia around the subject given that large budget cuts are likely to hit them shortly.

Along with other attendees at the research workshop organised by the The Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences Research ([IHSSR](#)) at Manchester Metropolitan University, I read the first chapter of jodi's [Democracy and other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics](#) book, entitled 'Technology: The Promises of Communicative Capitalism', ready to discuss it. The title of the book clearly signals both academia and a disenchantment with notions of freedom and democracy which instinctively made me feel that I was about to experience disappointment and frustration. And I did, writ large.

Expressions of frustration with resistance movements not actually delivering any meaningful blows to knock the confidence of capitalism in recession come early and often, and with profound over statement of what actually exists. Here on page 22, '***In our highly mediated communications environments we confront instead a multiplication of resistances and assertions so extensive as to hinder the formation of strong counterhegemonies.***

' After trying to unpack that for a while, and trying to work out how a high level of and all encompassing character of resistance renders it incoherent and ineffective, Jodi then helpfully alerts you, like the science bit in shampoo adverts, that this is actually the central point she's making, with: '

The proliferation, distribution, acceleration, and intensification of communicative access and opportunity result in a deadlocked democracy incapable of serving as a form for political change. I refer to this democracy that talks without responding as communicative capitalism

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I know I'm not the cleverest of people, but I couldn't help thinking over and over that these formulations could be put together with a little more ease for the reader. But then again, the content of what's being written seems designed to objectify the problem as technical or structural rather than self-reflective of the ideas being put forward as failing to cohere a progressive movement. In the chapter and subsequent discussion, there was no convincing explanation of what is different about Web 2.0 technologies from other technologies like newspapers, books, television or why they have caused political and intellectual debate to have declined in depth and insight.

To her credit, and unusual for many with a fetishistic view of technology, Jodi stridently rejected the notion that it was Facebook or Twitter that furthered the cause of protests in Egypt or Libya, and focussed on the role played by the working class in forcing the regimes there on to the defensive and being the real source of change. This was heartening and reminded me of an article early into the uprisings by Brendan O'Neil entitled '[Tunisians don't need advice from the Twittering classes](#)'. However, the celebration of working class activity wasn't sustained for very long and returning to solutions for people in the West, Jodi's criticism of the left for focussing on technology ended by her thrusting hackers into the vanguard of change - hoping these self-appointed technologists could bring down financial institutions by working in splendid isolation and sparking the masses into seizing control. It was compelled to agree with her at that point that democracy has a low standing with erstwhile progressive types.



[Talking therapies: good for people and politics?](#)

The public lecture followed a similar theme as that laid out in the research seminar on the first chapter of her book, and as during the question and comments section of the seminar it came to life in a way very few public discussions do these days. Someone from the audience flagged up how similar Jodi's focus on internet technologies was to the discussion that happened focussing on television in the 1980's. This was probably the most overtly political discussion in terms of referencing revolutions and organisational expressions of politics I've been to in the last 10 years, albeit maybe the audience were just recalling sides they took in similar discussion 20 years ago, but it was extremely unusual for it to happen today.

One of the most unusual aspects of the debate was when Jodi came back about what we can do today - calling on the supposed traditions of Leninist revolutionary practise and then repeated her desire to see some technology hackers lead the charge and ignite a revolution by bringing down financial organisations like the banks. This was followed by someone in the audience explaining how it wasn't Leninist to miss out the democratic process of developing a programme for revolution or developing transitional demands along the lines of Trotsky's Permanent Revolution. Maybe it was this unusual character of a public meeting today that prompted Jodi to respond to my question about developing a wider spirit of democratic process with a retort that **'the time for discussion is over'**, and then going on to encourage people to buy her book with offers of a signing. It's said that Americans don't do irony, and I really don't

think Jodi was trying her hand at it here - like when I suggested that her role as lecturer at the meeting contrasted with the idea that all we had was a cacophany of many and equal voices, which drew the very defensive and rather disingenuous response that she was just one message amongst others - err, the lecture was hardly a therapy circle for the rest of us!

Is Manchester developing a more engaging climate of public discussion of late? From these two discussions it would seem so, and what an engaging speaker Jodi is - a review of her written work to follow in the book reviews. Just on the [International Anthony Burgess Foundation](#) venue, what a super space - relaxed ambience and ideal location for such a discussion.