GIJS VAN OENEN & CHRISTIAN VAN DER VEEKE

'I SPEAK LIKE A TEN-YEAR OLD WITH STRANGE JARGON
ATTACHED TO IT'
AN INTERVIEW WITH JODI DEAN

Jodi Dean (1962) has been teaching political science at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York, from 1994 onwards, from 2007 as full professor. She got her BA degree in history at Princeton University in 1984, and both her MA (1987) and PhD (1992) degrees in philosophy from Columbia University. In graduate school, she became interested in Soviet studies and questions of ideology, and moved into political theory. Studying Marx, Lenin, and Stalin, and particularly Lukács, brought her to the Frankfurt School of critical theory. Her Ph.D. thesis, supervised by Jean Cohen, was published in a reworked version as *The Solidarity of Strangers* (University of California press, 1996). Her next book *Aliens in America* (Cornell university press, 1998), received broad media attention. Next to (co-)editing a number of books on political theory, she further published *Publicity's secret: how technoculture capitalizes on democracy* (Cornell 2002), and *Žižek's politics* (Routledge 2006). She serves as (co-)editor of the journal *Theory & Event* and maintains a nice weblog (jdeanicite.typepad.com). This interview was conducted on February 18, 2009, when Jodi Dean was in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, as the Verhagen visiting professor at the faculty of philosophy of Erasmus University Rotterdam.

GvO: Jodi, thanks very much for agreeing to do this interview. First, I would like to ask you about a recent development in your work, your interest in (Lacanian) psychoanalysis? How and when did that come about?

JD: I have got two kinds of semi-competing, semi-overlapping trajectories, or reasons: a Habermasian and a Lacanian approach to communication; the Lacanian approach is like an X-ray vision on, or the negative of a Habermasian approach. Both are ways to think about politics – and ethics – that begin with language. The Habermas side has a cognitive approach to language, whereas the Lacanian side emphasizes the irrational elements of language. So one is rooted in understanding and the other in the inevitability and productivity of perpetual misunderstanding. It's almost as if you follow Habermas all the way through – the more you think about language and how it always ultimately fails and misfires and has these points of enjoyment and attachment in it – you end up in this wonderful Möbius-strip that turns you into a Lacanian.

That's the systematic answer. But my interest in Lacan wasn't just a consequence of realizing the limits of Habermas, it was also more accidental. And that came with reading Slavoj Žižek's work. In the late nineties, as I became a non-Habermasian, I wrote a book on alien abduction (*Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1998) and the basic idea was: here are these folks who are firmly committed to what they think of as rational inquiry, or a rational attempt to explain and discuss their experiences with others. They think of themselves as presenting contestable claims to validity that they can argue for on the basis of good reasons. And yet they would be totally outside of Habermasian communicative rationality! As I was working on this alien abduction discourse as a kind of limit experience of problems of communicative rationality, on the side I was reading Žižek, who in this respect is appealing in all sorts of ways. After finishing the book on alien abduction, I read the *The ticklish subject* (1999), which I thought was profound, and still remains Žižek's best work. His account of the decline of symbolic efficiency, the kinds of paranoia, the decline of symbolic ideals and the rise of this injunction to enjoy, struck me as a new way or the right way of thinking about the present. So through this more

biographical point I would like to show how I came to this Lacanian stuff via Žižek.

GvO: You talked about the failure of language, as what brought you to question the Habermasian framework. We could link this with Axel Honneth's issue of recognition and misrecognition which you refer to in your first book also (The solidarity of strangers). Did you consider following this path further, so focusing on moral psychology or philosophical anthropology instead of highlighting the structural failure of language?

JD: I found Honneth's framework of self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem too optimistic and limited. His theory starts with the good idea of misrecognition and power struggles, but there is a redemptive tendency in his work that just empirically doesn't ring true. Žižek's account, based in these constitutive elements of violence, convinces me in a way that Honneth's 'happy' organization doesn't. I confess this is not a result of working systematically through his work and coming up with a critique. His account just doesn't seem to respond to the multiplicity and complexity of experiences of life and relationships right now.

GvO: Is it that you doubted the whole structure of acting like a Kantian subject, or is it more empirically and historically founded, that history just disproved this Habermasian construction of consensus and the success of communicative rationality?

JD: Žižek's Kant makes more sense to me as he shows that the categorical imperative itself becomes like this little tormenter. And that doesn't make the categorical imperative illegitimate, but this tormenter quality is a part of the ethical subject. You don't find this kind of analysis in the Habermasian or Honnethian account of morality. You don't see this super-egoistic compulsion there. It's like Kant becomes a 'vanilla-Kant', rather than a real, cruel, purifying Kant. For Žižek, that's the whole point − that's why its ethics! Precisely because of this horrible urge.

GvO: Let me rephrase this question in a more Hegelian style: do you think it's a coincidence that Žižek came into fame some years after 1989, or could he have had the same impact − or even the same thoughts - ten years earlier?

JD: Certainly it wouldn't have made as great an impact. Žižek's thinking wasn't motivated by giving cool readings of Lacan and Hitchcock, but by the crisis in the Balkans. He rightly resisted that, not wanting to be the poster-child for Balkan politics all the time, always having to speak about the Balkans. The Balkan-crisis made it possible to push him into prominence, but he is also right in the middle between the Soviet-bloc and the liberal capitalist-bloc that is called the West. He is that pivot-point.

GvO: Can we say that the appeal of the Lacanian framework for us is in a way due to the Balkan crisis, by the fragmentation it exhibits?

In *For they know not what they do* (1991), Žižek poses the problem in terms of a trick: we were promised liberal democracy but we got capitalism and nationalistic violence instead. The Western fascination with the changes that took place in 1989 was part of the infatuation with the idea that there were other people who admired our democracy. But then it twists and it becomes this nightmare of capitalism and nationalism. We now recognize the real impact of the loss of the soviet ideal: that the kind of ideals that might have been present when we could see them reflected through their absence, in our fantasy version of the Soviet Union, are realized in this horrifying version of ethnic and fundamentalist hatred and violence and forms of extreme neo-liberal capital financialization and violence.

GvO: Speaking more from the perspective of social philosophy, what also seems to have got lost in this fragmentation is the idea of civil society. In the early nineties we had to ask ourselves: is there anything 'left' of civil society?

JD: I think this is exactly the problem. I think there is nothing Left now in civil society. Civil society is primarily a (neo-)liberal space. Foucault's *Birth of biopolitics* is really wonderful in this regard. Civil society emerges as this site of aspiration, once leftists have given up on the state, and on state control of the economy, completely. There are always civil society

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organizations that are capable of helping people live wonderful lives and securing certain identities. Civil society can function as a stage where there can be struggles for inclusion and recognition and participation, and all those good things. But what is interesting is that civil society becomes key at the moment this so-called disciplinary society is actually withering away. So we don't have subjects in civil society capable of being civil society actors! It's just like how Habermas announces and laments the public sphere at the moment of its loss. Similarly, heirs of Habermas, civil society theorists like Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato in *Civil society and political theory* (1992), a fabulous book by the way, are emphasizing the role of civil society exactly at the moment it is disintegrating. But this is maybe the perpetual problem of political philosophy in general; we are always looking back as we go forward.

GvO: Should we conclude that the idea of publicity is gone as well?

JD: I am against the notion of publicity for a variety of reasons. On the one hand, what everybody started to refer to as 'publics' – including 'oppositional counter-publics' and what have you – used to be just interest groups! Referring to such groups in terms of 'public', and even 'identity', seems strange to me. Public is then used in a 'media' sense, something like an audience – 'the stuff that I think, and that people like me think.' It becomes so amorphous and fuzzy that it is just a bad analytical category. Also, the notion of a public functions ideologically: 'we really need to become aware of something' – the more aware we are, the more political something becomes. Publicity becomes a way to generate enthusiasm and an awareness, making it seem that we now all know something, but then action becomes progressively displaced, or weeded out. The Lacanian notion of 'the big Other' is more useful in this context.

GvO: Would you say there is no sensible or useful notion of a public anymore?

JD: Yes. The only useful notion I am OK with is 'the public' as synonym with 'the state'. When I use public, for example 'public housing' I mean 'state funded housing'. In this way it becomes a strict legal term.

GvO: What about theorists who see new publics emerge through objects and issues, such as Bruno Latour and Noortje Marres?

Noortje Marres' account of public basically just changes what we call an issue group into 'a public'. And I don't know what she gains with that. Why not call it an interest group? Noortje is very good in reminding us of the way that material objects initiate something happening, or prevent something from happening, which is important. But I don't think it's useful in political theory to now call the issue-group that emerges around and through an object a public.

GvO: With this proviso in mind, shouldn't we see this Latourian turn as a solution to the problem of recognition, and in particular to the question how the demand for recognition arises? Isn't there some way in which the impetus for this demand has been transferred to objects, replacing more discursive causes?

JD: Well I believe it's true that objects can compel us to be active. They can incite us, block us, and annoy us. Objects are actants, and this is a useful insight. But you don't have to explain that by turning to a public, or by turning the movement of objects into a public. By seeing these objects as representatives in a 'parliament of things'. Why do you want to call it a parliament? Why not just 'objects doing their things': they don't discuss with each other and that's exactly the use of an object-orientated account. The thing is, I don't think that when we leave this office here, all this stuff lying around is engaging in something quite exciting that we are just missing out on!

Actually, the theory of issue politics isn't part of the politics of recognition at all. That's actually one of the useful things about it. The struggle for recognition is one narrow terrain of politics and shouldn't be understood as the ultimate or fundamental level of politics. What I like about this issue politics and object politics is that they present good alternatives to this recognition politics.

GvO: So on the one side we have the problem of recognition and on the other side the alternatives of issue and object politics. Where does Žižek, or lacanian psychoanalysis, come in? Why do we need them?

JD: Well, Žižek claims that persons are objects as well as subjects. This 'objectness' of persons is politically relevant. Let me illustrate this point. In *The parallax view* (2006) Žižek talks about the object that insists and repulses, and he uses this example from Melville's *Bartleby, the scrivener*, in which Bartleby answers every question with the statement: 'I would prefer not to'. We wouldn't exactly call this agency, but it is some kind of objectness that causes, and impacts, and annoys, and enrages. This object-ness of Bartleby can be politically disturbing, and this is what Žižek's version of psychoanalysis brings out.

The Lacanian account of the subject is a subject of lack, it desubjectivises the subject, so it has all these awful object-like properties that seems to be more accurate of the way people are in politics: they are never as you want them to be. It's the recognition that people never do what you want! In some ways I thought about this as a way of looking at the old theories on masses, mobs and crowds. These entities tend to function as that which always resists what political theorists or actors want them to do, right? The mob is always present as either a wave that goes over things and that supersedes proper institutional lines, or as the bunch of workers never ever doing what the revolutionary party wants - either persisting in their lifeworld practices, or only developing trade-union consciousness. The mob is this other version of a political object. I have not done any-thing with this, but it is always in the back of my head.

GvO: How can we use these insights in politics?

JD: I think any political theory ideally should say something about taking power and exercising power and trying to do this in ways that make things better instead of worse. That would be more ideal than resisting objects.

By far the biggest problem for me is the extreme growth of inequality in neo-liberalism. The impossibility of offering really viable alternatives to the neo-liberal capitalist formation of the economy and the demise of the socialist alternative. I think that there is still hope within the socialist pro-ject that needs to be recovered. It may be a recovery in the sense of think-ing more about it; or a recovery in trying to repractise it. That socialist experiment didn't last very long! I am pretty much an old-fashioned modernist; I am in favor of big state structures to solve problems of social inequality and I think equality is a modernist ideal that is worth having.

GvO: This brings us to the notion of post-politics, as you discuss it in your recent work. It is a notion that is used by others and you criticize the con-clusions they draw from it, whether they are normative or descriptive. What is post-politics and why talk about it?

JD: Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière in particular have offered this idea of post-politics as a way to describe a technocratic, administrative approach to governance. Žižek picks this up and seems to agree with it. In the first instance there is the description of the present as one that has moved to an administrative state, where problems that the state might address are bureaucratized and individualized. So for example, if there is a problem with a housing project, it is specific to the people that complain about the housing project, and it is dealt with in bureaucratic ways: filing the proper forms, sending an inspector, and then taking it to the budget-ary committee, which may or may not allocate funds to deal with the problem, &c. According to this post-political view, the possibility of raising that claim up to stand for the inadequacy of housing in general, or the failing of the state to provide for infrastructure, is foreclosed. The struc-ture of state politics today prevents that from happening. From this, theo-rists of post-politics conclude that in a post-political time politics does not, cannot, emerge.

I think this is ridiculous. What I really think they are saying, is that this particular kind of neo-liberal ideology is the ruling ideology of the politi-cal parties in office and they are winning with this. They have been effec-tive in displacing political opposition via this strategy. There is thus a whole other way of describing the 'post-political' situation, and I will use the situation in the U.S. as an example, in which the right politicized all sorts of things! From the Ten Commandments in courthouses, worrying

about crèches in public areas, about Christmas trees, and evolution, and who gets to sleep with whom. There are a lot of things that are politicized, and raised to the claim of a universal as well. So there is politics all around. Calling this post-politics is a cop-out, a vacancy of mobilising left political ideas!

There is something in post-politics that's useful and interesting though, namely recognizing the way that some contemporary parties and actors try to present themselves as standing above or beyond politics. Obama is a great example of this. He wants to move beyond partisan politics. He wants to represent the unity of everything and this is supposed to put politics behind us. So we can use post-politics as a critical term, as saying that people who make this claim are actually doing politics, and this is an ideological move. But the description of our current situation as post-political is false.

CvdV: Coming back to your housing example, someone like Ernesto Laclau would say that listening to the demands of people and trying to fulfill their demands in an individualistic, non-violent and non-antagonistic way is precisely a virtue of democracy. He would interpret your asking for a more general politicization of an issue as resorting to some kind of populism: an antagonistic clash between a demand and the powers that be. But I guess your response to him would be that it is exactly the neo-liberal fantasy of democracy, as fulfilling individual demands, that's wrong with this picture.

JD: That is exactly what I would say. In the example of the housing problem, the claim is almost as a consumer's claim: 'I don't like the service I've been given, and I want you to repair it'. There is not a public – now in this more ideal sense! – where a state or a collective demands things in a collective way. Instead, we have a set of particular needs and you, state-structure, are the vehicle for providing for these needs. So you don't have to think collectively on either side. It's the state as a provider of services.

CvdV: So are you looking for an autonomous sphere of politics?

JD: I guess that has to be the repercussion. This is a dilemma for me. Because I do think of the political as this underlying antagonism, and I think it is not addressed primarily through the servicing of goods, but has to involve something of a universal claim, and a struggle in terms of that universal claim. That is indeed a description of more of an autonomous realm of the political. But I need to think about this more.

CvdV: In your recent work you describe the current state of neo-liberalism as 'Communicative Capitalism'. In your essay in the book Empire's new clothes (edited by Jodi Dean together with Paul Passavant, 2004) you argue that 'Because Communicative Capitalism relies on the alienation of language, it seems to foreclose the possibility of politics' (p.275). Could you say something more about this?

JD: I think about this in terms of Habermasian reflexivity, where the answer to communication is always more communication. But then what happens is that more and more communication produces its own circulating sphere of contributions to a debate, and reflections on these contributions, and reflections on the way the debate has been constituted. The actual substance – like, oh my God, a hundred thousand people here have been put into refugee camps and are denied a place! – gets lost in the commentary and the expression and all of the communication. My worry is that reflexivity actually becomes *drive*, in the Lacanian sense. It circulates around this absence, or loss, of something that would be more like the aspiration of successful communication. It is not the loss of the political, I wouldn't go that far. It's more the way that the political now gets distorted, in the sense of a particular curvature that politics is taking.

GvO: And at the same time this is the loss of democracy…

JD: It is the fulfillment and the loss at the exact same moment. I really want to have those together. I would claim that with the new media there is the absolute realization of Habermasian ideas of inclusivity, reciprocity, everyone gets to participate in the debate as long as they want, they can challenge any claim. And that's all we ever do!

GvO: Do you think the notion of alienation can play some role here?

JD: I don't think alienation is a contemporary problem. In the Internet and Facebook era, there is almost no alienation. My students feel very much connected with other people, constantly being mediated by telephones, computers etc. It is almost as in little hives or tribal states. The problem is actually not alienation at all. I think even some more alienation would be better. Now there is complete absorption in this mediated world. The alienation Axel Honneth sees for example doesn't seem to be true in a time of participatory media. People participate all the time! There is really too little alienation; alienation is what we need [*laughs*]. It would be a lack of absorption in the communicative spheres in which we find ourselves. It would inscribe a line, a cut, a distance.

CvdV: You want some alienation back, objectively, but not as an analytical concept?

JD: Yes.

CvdV: So in your view alienation would be the situation in which people aren't fully connected with each other by new media, because this inclusiveness doesn't amount to a more substantive communication. How does this correlate with your emphasis on collective or political identities? How does this alienation help in this respect?

JD: When Žižek describes ideology, he talks about the way ideological subjects need to have a degree of distance from their ideological position. For example the soldier is not the killing machine but is really a good person inside that has to do its duty. I think it is useful, but I think it doesn't apply now in the era of the decline of symbolic efficiency. But to understand how ideological identification typically works, alienation has its uses. We learn from it that to be a subject in a formation requires not full absorption in that formation, but a kind of distance from it. What I think is the case now, is that we don't have symbolic identities, like a soldier you move in and out of, but we have imaginary identities. You now have the soldier, which could be the war-game playing kid who's experience is that he is pushing things and killing things on the screen. 'I don't need to be a soldier to do this'. So the kid is not assuming an identity. There is no gap then between what he is doing and the identity that's associated with the

nature of the activity. This alienation wouldn't require something like 'who you really are' but something like recognition that you need to be distanced from your practice.

CvdV: So would you say some sort of alienation is needed to be called 'mature' or to reach some kind of maturity as an identity? We could say this is some kind of 'ontological alienation', a form we can find in the work of Hegel, in the fulfillment of the spirit, or with Sartre: the gaze of the other that objectifies me but at the same time makes possible for me the realization that I am essentially a subject. In communicative capitalism this reflective distancing has disappeared completely. How do we resist this trend and how do we get this 'ontological alienation' back?

JD: One answer is through the continued extension and intensification of the formation that turns into its opposite; building through from within. Or maybe, but I haven't thought about this systematically, we should emphasize the constant placing of the network communications within their economic and material context. These communication technologies are machines, like this recording device here on the table, that are made from substances, substances that can be disposed of, etc, and we ourselves aren't made of ether. We are also material; the 'stuffiness of stuff' can be helpful here.

People can also just get bored, and have enough of all these media! But that is unlikely. The last option is probably that alienation gets built in to the technology as soon as media becomes more personalized and separate. It is conceivable that people feel like they are realienated, so that the social networking phase passes by. I think that really could happen. You can see that for example in the move from blogging, which was like the trend in 2005 and 2006, with its real content and substantive reactions, to Facebook and Twitter with its 140 character responses, getting smaller and smaller.

CvdV: You said alienation as an analytical concept lost its uses. Are there any alternatives in your view, to conceptualize this structure of alienation?

JD: The way you talk about alienation now, suggests it functions like a Kantian regulative idea. That would be kind of neat! Rather than our problem it's our goal. With that kind of flip it could be analytically useful. I just don't think it's a problem. It's the lack of it that's a problem.

CvdV: *According to Negri and Hardt, and other followers of Gilles Deleuze, some sort of immanent utopianism should guide us. So this is without an emphasis on alienation as a regulative ideal and more on the indeterminate multitude?*

JD: My problem with this solution is that if this claim is true, that the multitude is all around us, so desiring and productive, why is it that nothing happens? Why are billions living in abject misery? No, there is not that positive side in the multitude, there is abject poverty and no, there is nothing good in picking garbage.

GvO: *This brings us back to the issue of politics. In a recent interview about his book* Infinitely demanding *(reviewed in Krisis 2008/2), Simon Critchley made the sweeping statement that President George W. Bush knew how to do politics and we, the left, don't. What is the alternative if we share his analysis, as you do, but don't want to subscribe to anarchism, as Critchley does? Is there any form of political organization that suits you?*

JD: Well, it is the revolutionary party for me! Not a party as a party that is trying to win votes, but as the organized set of collectives designed to try to overthrow and occupy the state. This isn't going to happen tomorrow, but at least it is a form for trying to think about aspirations.

Žižek gestures to slum dwellers as the revolutionary subjects, influenced by Mike Davis' book *Planet of slums* (2006) which is an analysis of an UN report on human settlements. From a certain perspective it's like Žižek is taking over Marcuse's point that we should put all our hopes on the third world, something like: 'anyone but us'. This is questionable for sure, but we do need to recognize there are vast movements and activities going on, huge urban populations, that intellectuals in Europe and the U.S. can learn from. Europe is not the centre of things. So I interpret Žižek's em-

phasis on the slums and slum dwellers as a first intuition that we should think of situations where people are living, in mega-cities, outside of the equation of standard economic theory. For any economist the fact that these people survive makes no sense; they don't fit in.

GvO: *You seem to put your faith in a vanguard party, while in one of your lectures here in Rotterdam earlier this week you suggested that the left should go back to the past, to look what is left of the left. Are these two compatible?*

JD: I think they are part of the same project. One tiny component – and I met guys in Yugoslavia who are doing some of this – could be learning from the past socialist experiences and recovering more of that history, of the history of those organizations. A case in point could be George Lipsitz, who is working in cultural studies on artists and activist in the thirties of the 20th century (*Rainbow at midnight: labor and culture in the 1940s*, 1994). It is a matter of becoming more attuned to these other organized political practices that didn't focus primarily on media and publicity and opinion formation. They show other organizational structures. Recovering that, work that intellectuals can help do, could be useful in thinking about different kinds of party building. This kind of work is difficult, both because of the amount of work, and the fragmentation within academia. It is very hard to pull these departments together and stand for a bigger historical project. It's hard to congeal all the projects that are already being undertaken.

GvO: *This sounds like a 'best practices' approach. But what are the criteria to decide upon what are the best practices? Who is going to decide this?*

JD: We are deciding this ourselves, and the results tell us. To look for a theoretical answer that is going to give us a structure, like an original position or ideal speech situation, is not going to be helpful. To look at sets of practices and experiments and their unintended consequences and to look at how they are brought about and work, in different places, would be better. So I don't think we end up with criteria that will be helpful for all time. We are looking for what works, in a Badiouian sense, with some sort of fidelity to commitment to equality. And answers that facilitate

economic inequality are bad answers; the ones that facilitate economic equality are good. That would be my first cut.

GvO: But isn't that reintroducing the whole original position problem again? Why is economic inequality bad?

JD: My goal is not to convince everybody, my goal is to overthrow the bad guys. And I don't think that the attempt to try to prove to super-rich people that the fact they have so much is vastly unjustified, compared to the diminishment of so many lives. I actually don't think we should waste our time with arguing with them or over that. That doesn't strike me as a kind of useful exercise. Other people can make that their job. I would rather spend my time stealing their money. I mean that seriously! – I know, I speak like a ten-year old, with like strange jargon attached to it... [*laughs*] – But I really feel that, once one recognizes that the claim of 'reasons are necessary' is situated, that there is a fundamental core of irrationality, and that reasons already get permeated by enjoyment, then we don't have to go back and be reintroduced to a reasonable kind of discourse in which we need to convince the rich that it is kind of unjustified what they have. We don't have to do that. There is a partisan divide here, the divide is fundamental and we can start our politics from there.

GvO: Is that still some kind of class politics?

JD: That's the whole point.

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