

# The Neofeudal Thesis and The Frankfurt School



*A Conversation with Jodi  
Dean, PhD*

## About Jodi Dean, PhD



Jodi Dean is a professor of political theory in the Political Science department of Hobart and William Smith Colleges in New York state where she has been teaching since 1993. Dean received her B.A. in History from Princeton (1980-1984) and received her PhD as well as

her MA and MPhil from Columbia University (1986-1992). She taught at the University of Texas, San Antonio (1992) and held visiting research appointments at the Institute for the Human Sciences in Vienna, McGill University, and Cardiff University. Dean is a co-editor for *Theory & Event*, and has edited several volumes, including *Reformatting Politics: Information Networks and Global Civil Society*, *Empire's New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*, *Cultural Studies and Political Theory*, and *Feminism and the New Democracy: Resisting the Political*. Dean has authored and edited thirteen books, the most recent being *Organize, Fight, Win: Black Communist Women's Political Writing* (2022). Dean's area of interest within political philosophy revolves around Marxism, psychoanalysis, and postmodernism. She has also recently authored several works on neofeudalism and has written extensively about Technoculture and cyberspace.

*Sapere Aude: To start, where are you from and who do you think the main influences are on your breadth of work?*

Dean: It's hard to say where I'm from because I moved around a lot as a kid -- but I teach at Hobart and William Smith colleges in Geneva, New York and I've lived there about 25 years. So that's I guess where I'm from. I'm in political science and I'm a political theorist, my primary -- or the text and the figures who shaped my thinking the most I would say are, Lenin, Lacan, Zizek, Marx and in some ways Althusser. I'll also say, I when I first started out -- Habermas. I did my dissertation on Habermas, so these are my reference points for critical theory kind of broadly.

*Sapere Aude: So more recently then, you've been talking a lot about neofeudalism in your work and I think at a very basic level - what is the conceptual merit of defining this kind of state that we are in as neofeudal rather than capitalist?*

Dean: Right so first - just to kind of fill out the concept a bit, my idea around neofeudalism is a response to Mackenzie Warks' question or provocation of, '*what if we're not in capitalism anymore but something worse?*'. So, I began thinking about it from this perspective of what if we're not in capitalism anymore, and that led me to think that, hey, maybe we're not in capitalism anymore. We've got, instead of the majority of economic activity being in commodity production, the majority of economic activity in services and that's not just the case in the EU, US, and in the UK but in all of the 'so-called' developed

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countries and in a large number of the ‘so called’ developing or less developed countries. At this point, we're talking like 70-80% of the labor force working in services. So that doesn't seem particularly capitalist - it seems like more and more wealth is accumulated also through fines, fees, and rents. These are not particularly capitalist forms of wealth accumulation; they are forms of taking not making. That's an expression

I get from Brent Christophers in his book on rentier capitalism which I highly recommend. So, these seem to be symptomatic of a formation that's not recognizably capitalist anymore.

So, I think about neofeudalism actually in terms of four aspects, first, the legal aspect or legal-state aspect which would be the parcellation of sovereignty. We've got lots of different mergers of the political and the economic and different forms of authority and wealth extraction throughout the social sphere where we it doesn't make sense to think in the kind of bourgeois modernity forms that these are separate. They're blurred together, that's a characteristic of feudalism. The kinds of social property relations we have now don't look a lot just like employer-worker but have dimensions of Lords and Serfs and that's like many of our relations to the platforms that kind of capture all

of our interactions and our data and metadata. Hinterlandization would be the landscape or spatiality of neofeudalism and it lets us think about the division of the kind of general social landscape into successful alpha cities and lots of desolate hinterlands. Even the division within cities between the thriving neighborhoods and the neighborhoods that have been utterly impoverished and decimated reflect this. Then finally, an affective level of generalized catastrophism and anxiety. Let's just think about the the kind of vibe or feel of neofeudalism. Those to me look really different from how anyone described bourgeois modernity and I think, thinking about our present in terms of neofeudalism lets people start to say – ‘oh god, you know things are a lot worse than I thought’.

*Sapere Aude: I think that that makes a lot of sense – then, in putting this thesis forward, do you think that our current neofeudal society or transitory neofeudal state is the logical extension of capitalism or say -- the height of capitalism itself? Or is it more of a returning to capitalist origins because there's no need to shroud the expropriation and exploitation of our society in something else?*

Dean: Can I have it both ways? I do want to have it both ways - I want to have it both ways in that I don't want to think of it as a return because that would posit some kind of cyclical notion of history.

Which, I don't think that ‘going back’... the temporality doesn't sit well with me, but the way you expressed it was so good because it's not going back exactly. It's aspects of our society and our economy that

have been historically present, that are now being revealed more and more with a kind of direct presence than they held before. So, let's say forms of unwaged labor, forms of taking not making, those are present but now they're more dominant. I don't think it's a return, I think it's like a continuity from capitalist processes. It's capitalism turning itself into something else and its ongoing, right? So, it's not like my argument is not that neofeudalism has replaced capitalism - my argument is that capitalism has these neofeudalising tendencies that are now becoming dominant.

*Sapere Aude: That makes perfect sense, then, for going back and reconciling or at least discussing the other fundamental parts of what modern neomarxists take to be essential for understanding the state of our social relations, how does the role of the market and ideology fit into the neofeudal thesis?*

Dean: So, first, under neofeudalism we have more relations that are not mediated by the market but are mediated by direct kinds of taking. We pay fees for freaking everything, right? That's not necessarily about that fee itself, it is not the same thing as pricing, right? Weirdly, we get attached to fees for buying something. Like, if you buy tickets online for anything there's a fee for that -- which seems so strange. Or the way that when we enter into any kind of platform and they take our data and metadata, they regulate where we can go and how we can express ourselves, that's not all market relation. One last thing on the market portion of that question -- I think that things like Uber show the

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'market' destroying itself. We work, they destroy markets, and they are about getting rid of the market and making it the case that in order to do X you have to do it through them. Or, through whatever means they provide. One of the worst versions of this is what happens to people who do things like -- maybe handymen or contractors or dog walkers or house cleaners, before they might just put their names up on a local bulletin board or rely on word of mouth.

Now, we've got these digital intermediaries that come in that are the access point for a consumer looking for the service and the service provider but then they don't get to set their own terms of employment as easily as they could before. They have to give the freaking, you know, app or platform a cut. So, I think we need neofeudalism to help us think about the way, and in fact some of the things that we've thought about U.S. markets, aren't operating actually as markets anymore.

On ideology – so, I guess it was the late 90s or early 2000s... it's hard to think about that but, people started talking a little bit about post-ideology, meaning that it's not like you could say that

there was a dominant ideology that everyone accepted or agreed with that then had to come under critique. Instead, there are multiple different, for lack of a better word, ‘ideologies’ -- you know, with a small ‘i’. But these ideologies, people start talking more in terms of discourses, or publics, or now identities, but to say that there's one overarching ideology doesn't seem to really fit with where we are. Like, we can recognize, “OK here are people who talk a lot about political theory... here people who more interested in religion... and here are people who, you know, talk about gardening,” or whatever, but to say that everything is within one ideology doesn't capture our world.

*Sapere Aude: I think that makes a lot of sense too, a good logical place to go from there might be -- how should we modify our past systemic philosophical thinking to be more reflective of our everyday activities within this neofeudal thesis? Especially given what we just talked about, because a lot of scholars that see themselves as neomarxists rely on that idea of everything as mediated by the market due to market exchange and the dominance it holds over our social relations – what do you think is the most important thing to now rewrite?*

Dean: That’s a smart question, I was going to give a flip answer like, “everybody should just read everything I've written and then start from there” but I don't actually think that. But, I think that what I have found kind of surprising is how interesting and appealing it is to look back at anything that was written before postmodernism and before deconstruction and to take the Marxist debates from the 70s seriously

again. It almost seems like we made this wrong turn and that neoliberalism and postmodernism was all the form of defeat and now we've got to go back to these other kinds of philosophy.

I also find really useful... I'll make a plug for the book Co-edited with Charisse Burden-Stelly, *Organize, Fight, Win: Black Communist Women's Political Writing* - like going back to this writing, the text we've collected start from 1928 and go to 1956 and this writing is amazing because this is all about the struggle and it's all about building unity. It's all about the kind of practical work of organizing against things like; white supremacy, male supremacy, imperialism, and fascism.

*Sapere Aude: Why do you think that a lot of academics then resist this turn, not within just the neofeudal thesis, but resist having a dialectical conception of almost any systemic issue? A lot of academics are so committed to this tradition... not always the analytic one, but to a particular way of thinking about things?*

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Dean: I think it's I think it's rooted in anticommunism honestly; I think it's rooted in having been educated in either a Cold-War or post-Cold-War world that said that communism, or anything associated with communism,

was bad and defeated. “It's really that we've got the remnants of or are still in the wake of, anti-communism and that people need to kind of get over that and go beyond that and really appreciate that tradition.”

*Sapere Aude: Related to that especially is, I think, the tendency to distance themselves publicly from Marxist thought in the Frankfurt school. Much of the first wave was so concerned about the optics of even saying ‘Marxism’ in their work and you can feel that same tendency in a lot of academics today. With that, how do you think that we should then conceive of this kind of transitory phase of our system within Adorno and Horkheimer's conception of the mythic and the overtly scientifically rational in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*?*

Dean: So first, I'm going to answer this in different ways. So at the

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beginning of COVID, I decided to go back to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and work through it again. As I was going through it and I felt two ways - on the one hand, like this is ridiculously hard and the other hand, I was like oh... the more I work with it, I feel the argument. I can feel it, even if I can't explain it very well.

Well then, I was like, that's just an illusion! If you can't explain it very well, that's just an illusion. So I don't really know - I feel that my

overarching sense after returning to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is that, I think I reject their move to instrumental reason as the problem. I think that is a rejection of class struggle and a rejection of some Marxist historical materialism. To see all of and to read all of the problem as one of an instrumental relation to thought goes back to the problem of myth in relation to nature. That turn just seems like it boils down to - well, 'thinking is bad' but like that can't be what they mean. So what is this right? I mean it's like it's a trap of being stuck in a trap of thought. I just don't think that's helpful; I think they get stuck there because they abandon class struggle and then it's part of and totally becomes about; 'what does it mean to be stuck in anti-communism?'. So, I think I went off track with the question, what was the question again?

*Sapere Aude: I think that that's a perfect response in line with the original question because you can see that play out in their politics in their lives, where you have Adorno calling the cops on his own students and Horkheimer being a pro-Vietnam War academic, of course that is rooted in anti-communism and the trap of being stuck in the trap of your own thought and losing touch with praxis at the end of the day.*

Dean: I just saw something, I didn't follow it up 'cause it was too late last night, and I shouldn't be on social media at 1:00 AM, but people were saying stuff about Horkheimer being responsible for the death of Walter Benjamin - in that Benjamin asked him for like \$500 so he could get out of Germany and Horkheimer was like, 'no I don't have it'

- but he had taken something like \$50,000 from the Institute for Social Research and put it in a bank. Have you seen this? I didn't follow up and who knows if it's true...

*Sapere Aude: Yeah, it's hard because there's always conspiracies surrounding Benjamin's death because it's so tragic. But, I think that goes hand in hand with the conflation of their history with these complicated external politics that just totally lacked any praxis. People fundamentally don't understand what happened in their lives and you have people like Martin Jay writing a history of the Frankfurt School is not full in any way. So there's always a conspiracy about Benjamin's death that comes back to Adorno or Horkheimer but at the end of the day to blame Benjamin's death on either of them is really cruel when they were all Jewish scholars fleeing Nazi occupation and very narrowly escaping. I think all of these conspiracies attempting to place blame at all, upon anyone or anything other than the hostile takeover of all of Germany by the Nazis when he tragically took his own life, can be really reactionary and a distraction from what they were saying.*

Dean: I need to follow up on this, I haven't followed all of the conspiracy theories about the Frankfurt school intently, but I see them every once in a while. Like I saw someone saying something online about connecting the Frankfurt school with the CIA I'm like, well, that's not a conspiracy everybody knows Marcuse worked for the OSS!

*Sapere Aude: It's always so strange how the involvements of political philosophers on the left get scrutinized like their less-than-savory political ties*

*negate their work but you have people like Wittgenstein rumored to have worked for the KGB and that's seldom mentioned in any conversation about his philosophy.*

Dean: Oh, that I forgot!

*Sapere Aude: I did too! the last time I talked about the politics of the Frankfurt School I had this discussion about the political actions of analytic philosophers being disregarded within the rhetoric of philosophy writ large where you have people who are fundamentally anti-communist within academic philosophy that always point the finger at 'modern Marxists' and say, 'Oh well your favorite scholar worked with X' but then you look at analytic philosophers and they were doing the same or actively had ties to the Nazi party?*

Dean: Well, they were all Nazi's, yeah. I guess that is not fair... yeah, no.

*Sapere Aude: I mean Heidegger existed...*

Dean: Well, there we go.

*Sapere Aude: Well, that was a tangent but - we talked a lot about praxis today for widely different political contexts, and I think that brings in the question, should we see history as contingent or as kind of predetermined in this way that Postone articulates?*

Dean: I mean I'll distance myself from the Postone part - I'll just say that, I believe this is in the 18th Brumaire where Marx writes, "men

make their own history but not under conditions of their choosing”. So, both conceptions can be right. I mean I think we need to do more of this emphasizing that we're in the picture that we take. So, it's a mistake to oppose these things, I think. The other way that Zizek puts this problem is as ‘subject as the gap in the structure’.

*Sapere Aude: I think that makes sense and is completely in line with what you have been saying in relation to this neofeudal thesis – I guess my remaining question that's oriented more towards praxis is just, how do we conceive of ourselves within this system as we're going through this kind of transitory phase and things are presenting themselves more like servitude in this not entirely new way but very direct way do?*

Dean: What I honestly think is that we've gotta stop worrying about our identities and worry about organizing to change the world.

*Sapere Aude: I think that is great and reminds me a lot of what Mark Fisher wrote in *Exiting the Vampire Castle*.*

Dean: Yeah, you know that one? I love that one. It was so powerful, I mean - that's why in my last book was called *Comrade* I dedicated it to ‘MF’. I didn't spell it out 'cause, I didn't, yeah... That was a great essay, that was really like one of the first things I ever wrote a comment on, it was in response to that. I don't even know if it still exists online anymore, because it was published in *Meditations*. But yeah -- it's like, what if we stopped thinking about how do we think about ourselves and

thought about like, 'OK what are we fighting for and how are we organizing to achieve that goal' -- how are we organizing to fight for a better system.

*Sapere Aude: Yeah and I think he was correct and you're absolutely correct in what you're putting forward now, I mean you saw - even in the response to that piece in academia, as soon as that became more widely discussed people were not ready to talk about identity politics and it's inherently divisive elements when it is put before really concrete solidarity to change things. Now people are totally invested in identity politics in a really reductive way.*

Dean: So it's so funny -- my very first book which came out came out in 1996 and it was called *Solidarity of Strangers: Feminism After Identity* -- I got that really wrong, right? Like - I mean, I thought it was, in the 90s at least, and it still is the case that people are talking about identity politics and the critique of it. I really thought that we were moving out of that and then instead, it kind of returned and in all sorts of different ways. I mean it seems like right now it's useful to recognize that the right is anchoring their politics in this particular version of their own kind of mythologized white or white masculine identity. I guess that's what we talked about today too, is like, how do you escape this symbolic representation? How do you escape this fundamental reduction or like essentialization of someone's politics? I may have mentioned already, *Organize, Fight, Win* coming out in October Co-edited by myself and Charisse Burden-Stelly, what's so great is that the

Black Communist Women are writing that are in this book, they never worried about their identities. They never worry about anyone's identity at all -- like that's not the thing, right? Instead, they might interview Black women looking for domestic work in Harlem during the depression and they talked to them about their working conditions, and they talked to them about how their you know how they're negotiating the relations with the working class white women who are trying to employ them but it never becomes about anyone's identity. The whole situation is praxis, struggle, labor, you know? Unity, that kind of thing, and I think that's useful.

*Sapere Aude: Yeah, we should always just be fighting for total solidarity and find unity wherever we can, I think in that vein, the final question I have for you would be -- what unity do you see in the neofeudal thesis for praxis?*

Dean: My hope is that neofeudalism as a category lets us recognize how struggles among and throughout the service sector more accurately present themselves today. Just the ecologically decimated environmental struggles, the kind of crises of social reproduction, strike struggles, the billionaires mass accumulation of wealth, struggles around technological dictation of every aspect of our lives, this is all a part of the same struggle that I think is captured by neofeudalism as a category.

*Sapere Aude: I think that's a perfect close to what has been a really great conversation. Thank you for sitting down with me thank you for talking about*

*your current work and some of your influences, this has been very illuminating!*

*I think this conversation really brought everything together for me, I hope it brings everything together for the people reading.*