

Jodi Dean

Four Theses on the Comrade

Multiple figures of political relation populate the history of political ideas. For centuries, political theorists have sought to explain power and its exercise via expositions of the duties and obligations, virtues and attributes of specific political figures. Machiavelli made the Prince famous (although he wasn't alone in writing for or about princes). There are countless treaties on kings, monarchs, and tyrants. Political theorists have investigated the citizen and foreigner, neighbor and stranger, lord and vassal, friend and enemy. Their inquiries extend into the household: master and slave, husband and wife, parent and child, sister and brother. They include the workplace: schoolmaster and pupil, bourgeois and proletarian. Yet for all these figurations of power, its generation, exercise, and limits, there is no account of the comrade. The comrade does not appear.

The absence of the comrade from US political theory, to use a specific case, could be a legacy of the Cold War. John McCumber's history of the impact of McCarthyism on the discipline of philosophy in the United States notes the twenty-year disappearance of political philosophy from the field. Academic political philosophy only reemerged in 1971 with John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, a book that subordinated politics to questions of moral justification and secluded actual political and social issues behind a veil of ignorance. But the Cold War can't account for why few socialist and communist theorists produced systematic accounts of the characteristics and expectations of comrades. Perhaps a thorough inquiry into the comrade is missing from "scientific socialism" because socialist and communist thought doesn't offer a political theology of sovereignty or a humanist communion of all humankind. It doesn't provide elaborate origin stories but focuses instead on histories of conflict and struggle. Socialist and communist parties are born out of splits and schisms, simultaneous beginnings and endings of comradeship.

One exception to this general absence of a theory of the comrade can be found in the writing of Bolshevik theorist Alexandra Kollontai. Another exception comes from the Soviet literary writer Maxim Gorky. Neither provides a systematic or analytical explication of the comrade as a figure of political belonging. But they do give us an affective opening into the utopian promise of comradeship.