The Lingering of the Party

Jodi Dean

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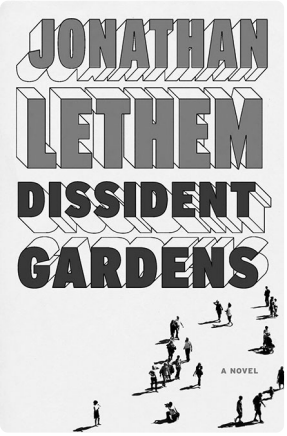
Political theorist Jodi Dean asserts that Jonathan Lethem's novel *Dissident Gardens* (2013) "gives communism a body where we can again feel its beating heart". She describes how Lethem "lets us sense the continued vibrancy of communist desire on the left despite the absence of a party."



Jonathan Lethem's new novel, *Dissident Gardens*, opens communism, and its party, to new appreciation. [1] More than utopian experiment, communism in Lethem's novel is an egalitarian insistence that pervades the multiple movements of the second half of the twentieth century. He traces this insistence through the desires and disappointments of a family of New York Jews. Challenging the Cold War convention that conflates communism and fascism into a single totalitarian nightmare, Lethem gives us communism as enduring human feeling.

Anti-communism writes history with numbers, quantifying an ideology it has never understood. A million in Stalin's Terror. Twenty to thirty million during the Great Leap Forward. Another two to three million under the Khmer Rouge. Singular tyrants and madmen hold in place the enormous numbers that dress estimates as precision – Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot. For anti-communists fed by cold war, communism appears in the extremes of the leader and his statistically significant victims. The epic subsumes the everyday. Lost between the one and the millions are the dedicated, whether cadre or fellow traveller, who struggle to build a world of solidarity, equality, and freedom. Anti-communism's dismissal of the possibility of capitalism's alternative replaces active people with a passive population. It endeavours to bury in abstraction the deep passion for a communal world that the communist party enflamed and harnessed. No marches and meetings, summer camps and workers' orchestras for the anti-communists. No expanded sense of oneself through a deepening awareness of connection to others, to history, and to a cause. No lift out of obscurity into the power of a common will such as Vivian Gornick describes in her still unsurpassed, *The Romance of American Communism*, a book comprised of a year of conversations with American communists and ex-communists. [2] Instead, anti-communism presents communism as the cold determination of a godless science having the hubris to take the place of religion and offering nothing more than the animal satisfaction of the appetites. Gornick brings to life the rich emotional world of American communism. Communists are those who care more deeply, live more fully, than anyone else. The struggle for justice injects intensity into every interaction. Intimacy arises out of loyalty and common struggle, not the exchange of personal fantasies. In stark contrast to the mid-century critique of Marxism levelled by Hannah Arendt and others, communism promises much more than the satisfaction of material needs. It promises freedom for the spirit released from poverty's desperate burden, from ceaseless work securing the means of life. For desperately poor and barely literate immigrants, communism is a source of knowledge and power – the knowledge of how the world works and the power to change it. Miners, farm workers, and those struggling to earn enough to eat come out of their isolating ignorance into a civilizing civilising connectedness. They enhance each other with common cause. Responsible to neighbours and fellow workers, communists are known and know

themselves for their willingness to take a stand. Across the United States, hundreds of organisers were beaten, jailed, and killed in their struggles for union and civil rights. Even those engaged in the boring, repetitive work of distributing leaflets or trying to recruit new members as the official line changed, or chafing against the smugness of higher ups, experience their life in the party as intensely meaningful. For the first half of the twentieth century, communism gave some Americans the feeling that the world was of one piece, their work meaningful as the work of a class, their struggles significant as part of a global struggle to liberate collective work from those claiming it for their own private profit. At barely a million members over its lifetime as a party, American communism has been sidelined in the epic battle between communism and capitalism, written out in a story now starring business and entrepreneurs. The role of the communist party as a political locus for new immigrants, lever in unionisation, and force for racial equality has faded in the broader amnesia of a capitalist culture's incessant individualism and presentism. Whether Moscow's puppets or spies, after 1989, the answer matters to few outside academia. Even the renegades' catalogues of resentment, their memoirs of years spent following the zigzags of a line leading further away from the revolutionary victory of the working class, fail to captivate. Why didn't they just quit? History is over. The communist threat defeated, the dreams of communists in America embarrass the left even as the right keeps them in sight, serving as more ammunition in the battle for guns they continue to wage despite having already won. Absent communism continues nonetheless to shape the US Left. Youthful occupiers maintain that they are autonomous, barely aware of the term's legacy as a statement of independence from the party. The middle-aged with fight left in them rehearse the old conflicts, carrying the wounds of their sectarianism less as scars than trophies. Tendencies to judge political success and failure from the perspective of this missing communism mark the rare site of generational convergence. Communists, organised, disciplined, and dogmatic, provide the ideal point from which we judge ourselves. Are we active enough, dedicated enough? *Do we have what it takes? Dissident Gardens*, unfolds in this space of communism's determining absence. It opens in 1955 with the quintessential ritual of twentieth – centuy communism – the trial. The trial is set in a kitchen in Queens. Rose Zimmer, nee Angrush, second-generation Brooklyn Jew, of Russian and Polish descent, long-time Party member and vigilant block watcher in the planned working-class residential community of Sunnyside Gardens, is being expelled from the party. Rose is "the party-made New Woman, unforgiving in her nature and intoxicating in her demands, her abrupt swerves and violent exclusions". Fully embodying Earl Browder's slogan, "Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism", Rose is dedicated to civic involvement as well as to Abraham Lincoln, whom she loves through Carl Sandberg's six-volume biography for grasping – even before Marx – the priority and superiority of labour to capital. The crime for which she is being expelled is passion, "excessive zeal in the cause of Negro equality", the party's sterile term for her affair with a black cop. Rose's trial recalls the Chicago trial of Richard Wright's comrade, Ross, twenty years earlier. Wright's account was included in his memoir, *American Hunger*. It also appears in *The God That Failed*, the "how-to manual for transforming interwar radicals into cold-war liberals". Wright's [3] contribution is exceptional in its attunement to communism's capacity to reach into people's hearts. Though horrified by the scene of his black comrade accepting guilt for a wide array of crimes against people, class, and party, Wright finds in it a spectacle of glory: Ross is awakened. "He was one with all the members there, regardless of race or colour; his heart was theirs and their hearts were his; and when a man reaches that state of kinship with others, that degree of oneness, or when a trial has made him kin after he has been sundered from them by wrongdoing, then he must rise and say, out of a sense of the deepest morality in the world: 'I'm guilty. Forgive me'".

There's no such spectacle of glory in Rose's trial. The over-dressed party hacks, including her former lover, Sol, drone on in a fog of procedures and talk. "Here was Communist habit, Communist ritual: the living-room trial, the respectable lynch mob that availed themselves of your hospitality while dropping some grenade of party policy on your commitment,

lifting a butter knife to slice a toast and using it in passion to sever you from that to which you'd given your life." Having lived for and through communism, Rose is tired. Her heart's not in this fight. Unlike the small-minded apparatchiks before her, she has already proven that she has what it takes, and then some. The trial that mattered was eight years earlier, when the party abetted the end of her already dying marriage by sending her husband to East Germany to become a spy. Khrushchev's secret speech exposing Stalin's terror and rupturing irreparably an American communism already strained and weakened by McCarthyism is but months away. The stale insinuations of the sadly bourgeois party functionaries fail to stir up much of anything in Rose. Even a quick under-bra squeeze from Sol is more a reminder of longing than a rekindling. Like communism, her desire for a black cop is already too radical to be contained in a desiccated party.*Dissident Gardens* presents the story of the American left from the thirties through Occupy Wall Street as a Jewish family drama – three generations of hope and disappointment. In an interview in *Publisher's Weekly* last year, Lethem describes the novel's structure as licensed by "memory's faltering and indirect method of investigation." The characters' pasts look different as their lives go forward, tragedies recalled as farce. The novel's beating heart and pressing absence is Rose's passion – communism. Like the kitchen trial, the novel stars a woman's body in the overwhelming intensity of her longing. Her vast breasts attract men, express loathing, tumble out of ripped nightclothes, pool like pancake batter onto a tile floor, and sag, yellow and mole-strewn. Her vagina claims its rightful entitlement to visits from neighbourhood penises, even if one happens to belong to a married, black cop. Her digestive system is so clogged and inefficient near the end of her life that she feels she's being converted to a block of solid human waste. Rather than reducing the political to the personal or diminishing the enormity of the insight into the historical destiny of the world's workers by treating it as merely a demand for material satisfaction, however, Lethem enlarges communism through the senses of the body, the appetites that are too much with us. The gripping pleasure of this brilliant, expansive book is that Rose knows what her life is for, which is, "not incidentally, the sole prospect for the human species". Embracing leaking, sweating, pulsing, bodies, Lethem gives us communism without shame. The certainty that magnifies Rose's world pulses through her body, spilling over onto those people who are closest to her. Not surprisingly, they resist even as the structure of desire Rose's passionate intensity creates, makes them far better than they would otherwise be as it installs within them a gap of longing that resists the creeping cultural narcissism of the last dismal decades of the twentieth century. Dissident Gardens is Lethem's ninth novel. Recipient of a MacArthur "Genius Grant," he has also authored numerous essays and short stories. His first three novels were science fiction with postmodern inflections. Motherless Brooklyn, winner of a National Book Critics Circle Award, and Fortress of Solitude, established him as a Brooklyn writer and literary genre-bender. Chronic City, which directly preceded Dissident Gardens, is a post-9 / 11 novel set in an alter-Manhattan where the Twin Towers haven't been seen in years because they are subsumed in fog. The characters, which include a former child star and a former rock writer, discuss important ideas in a stoned haze. Searching eBay for an object that may not even exist, they become paranoid with the suspicion that everything is connected even though nothing adds up. This is a New York closing in on itself, tracing conspiracies and searching for truth in a world of failures, fakes, and formers. In contrast to this loss that encloses, in Dissident Gardens the disintegration of the communist party – Rose's expulsion and Khrushchev's speech – opens up communism to the ferocity of disappointed desire. Cut free from the myth of the Soviet Union and the historicity of its failure, communism endures in the "passage of exiled sentiments from one subject's body to the next". Gornick presents the affective life of the Communist Party of the United States as lasting about forty years. Lethem shows it living on in the political feeling the left can neither live up to nor shake. The affective life of communism persists in how the left desires. Rose's communist conviction shapes her daughter, cousin, grandson, and lover's son as the next generations of the US left. Miriam, the daughter, is Rose's "renegade self" and "demon memorizer of her innermost hypocrisies". In a scene emblematic of their combustible relationship, Rose

shoves Miriam's head into a gas stove. Rose is engulfed in raging disappointment upon encountering her naked daughter with a college boy – "you've neglected to learn how the world works, to understand how the world is a product of history, you'd rather understand how a man's schlong works, attend the college of sexual intercourse". Miriam is slack with helplessness both suicidal and resistant; she'd die to get away from her mother. All the same, Miriam is also a strong, worthy adversary. She capitalises on her mother's spent fury, extracting emotional concessions. Miriam experiences Rose as a volcano of death. "In Rose's lava of disappointment the ideals of US Communism had gone to die their slow death eternally; Rose would never die precisely because she needed to live forever, a flesh monument, commemorating socialism's failure as an intimate wound." Miriam escapes Queens for Greenwich Village where she exchanges communism for commune, pot, and a new-left politics of petty theft and absurdist gestures. She marries an Irish folksinger, Tommy Gogan, member of a hokey Irish brothers' act and part of the folk music scene of the mid-sixties. For the new left, the sixties appear as a time when political possibilities flourish, even as they are diminishing, collective ties unravelling into individuated successes and failures. In some of the most evocative and powerful writing in the book, changes in folk music stand in for the loss of a common world. Bob Dylan's nasal cry asks from every radio, "how does it feel," magnifying the loneliness of the transient young, self-exiled individual from the constraining institutions of Eisenhower's America. In doing so, however, Dylan's voice appropriates for itself the communal property of the collective voicing that was folk music. "For, what was it to believe yourself part of a cadre of voices, a zone, a scene, a field of engagement defined by its range and relevance – for what was it to be a folk?" Dylan shrinks "an entire world to his sole person". Rose's cousin, Lenny (Lenin) Angrush, is suspended between love for Miriam and identification with Rose. Rose models desire; Miriam is the object of it. Miriam is his centre, the love of his life from the time he first holds her as a baby through her inaccessibility as a teenager and woman. Lenny may stink of misplaced longing, but his loyalty is unsurpassed. Lenny doesn't fit in a "world of pragmatists and price tags". He persists, sordid and out of date, in the timeless space of the chess shop on Washington Square Park, later sinking into petty deals at the edges of the IRA. He's a man "abandoned by history," finding nothing but irrelevancy at the beginning of the seventies: "Miriam's Yippie boycotts and daycare marches; the folksinger's death penalty vigil; hair-splitting Trotsky dreamers and Frank Fanon third world fetishists, French eggheads who'd reconfigured Marxism as mumbo-jumbo, a new form of Kabbalah". All Lenny's hopes result in failure, even the diminished substitutes of a proletarian baseball team for the revolution, numismatics for *Capital*. The Last Communist, as he romanticises himself, is unloved and unmourned. Rose's grandson, Miriam and Tommy's only child, is Sergius. When we first encounter him, he's at sea, a man in his forties, floating in the ocean, "a helpless pink balloon adrift atop gibbous squiggles of his own reflection". Sergius was raised by Quakers after his parents were killed in Nicaragua. The orphaned child of the new left, he has little sense of where he comes from, his politics formed out of religion, music, and loss. It's hard to determine whether his pacifism is a tenacity that links him to Rose or the passivity of a generation from whom political passion has been evacuated. Occupy, via his enlivening sexual encounter with a Marxist Pixie Dream Girl active in the movement, holds out the possibility of new connections to past and future, enabling Sergius to recognise himself as an "American Communist" even as he has no idea what that might mean. Cicero, the character not related to Rose by blood, the fat, gay son of Douglas Lookins, her black police lieutenant lover, is her proper political heir. Cicero inherits from his childhood years with Rose her titanic will, intellect, and appetite. As he tells Sergius when the grandson bothers him for stories about her: "Meeting her as a defenseless child, my tongue was bitten to pieces before I understood it was for speaking. I had to get away to learn to open my mouth, yet if she was in front of me now I'd probably fail to speak truth to power". Cicero escapes to Princeton and academia, landing in a small college in Maine similar to Lethem's alma mater, Bennington. But he gets closer to Rose, too, as he accepts that his capacity to insist on himself, to make himself the issue and his presence the politics, came from her: "The fact that she reveled in the dismay and

indignation generated by his presence at her side, the outlandish enlistment of the black boy as the righteous commie-Jew divorcee's right hand: first inkling of his own brazenness". He was her protégé and she paraded him, supported him, and challenged him until she made an indelible place for herself at the core of his being, a place Cicero summons up and enters even after Rose is gone. Since Rose outlasts her family, Cicero is the one who is with her up to the end, practicing for the vigils he'll spend the next decade making as his friends start dying of AIDS. He visits Rose in the nursing home as she goes in and out of dementia. Cicero unleashes her appetite, deadened by the bland hospital food, bringing pastrami, pierogis, borscht, lasagna, cheesecake, and licorice. When Rose is alert, she's unappreciative and attempts to shame him for being wasteful. Cicero, though, recalling how she fed him as a child, enjoys feeling extravagant. Unlike Miriam and Lenny, he sees himself as someone who matters when he looks at himself through Rose's eyes, even though she fails to recognise his photo on the back cover of his first book. Lethem has given communism a body where we can again feel its beating heart. Even more, he lets us sense the continued vibrancy of communist desire on the left despite the absence of a party. An insistent longing that refuses to reduce the world to what we are given infuses movements, impulses, theories, and acts that would otherwise appear as just so many singular instances. In the brilliance of Lethem's writing, American communists endure without apology or shame, with beliefs that exist "in the space between one person and another, secret sympathies of the body. Alliances among those enduring the world." For communists, living fully connected to the immensity of the human struggle for equality and justice means that disappointment and desire carry one another. What Lethem grasps, what he takes back from anti-communist propagandists, is how the epic subsumes the everyday. It doesn't devour it. It infuses it, tying together the fragmented feelings and moments of embodied life.

Jodi Dean is the author of numerous books and articles. Her books include *Solidarity of Strangers* (1996), *Aliens in America* (1998), *Publicity's Secret* (2002), *Žižek's Politics* (2006), *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (2009), *Blog Theory* (2010) and *The Communist Horizon* (2012). Her most recent book is *Crowds and Party,* published by Verso in 2016.

Footnotes

1. Jonathan Lethem, *Dissident Gardens: A Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2013).
2. Vivan Gornick, *The Romance of America Communism* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).
3. David C. Engerman in the foreword to the 2001 edition from Columbia University Press.

Tags

Capitalism, Commons, Communism

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