

# COMRADE

*An Essay on Political Belonging*

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## CHAPTER ONE

# From Allies to Comrades

SEVERAL JOKES IN PRESIDENT Barack Obama's address at the 2016 White House Correspondents' Dinner targeted Senator Bernie Sanders. Sanders was running a surprisingly strong campaign against the Democratic Party's presumptive presidential nominee, former secretary of state Hillary Clinton. After a few shoutouts to celebrities and politicians, Obama turned to the subject of Sanders, saying:

A lot of folks have been surprised by the Bernie phenomenon, especially his appeal to young people. But not me, I get it. Just recently, a young person came up to me and said she was sick of politicians standing in the way of her dreams. As if we were actually going to let Malia go to Burning Man this year. (Laughter.) That was not going to happen. (Laughter.) Bernie might have let her go. (Laughter.) Not us. (Laughter.)

I am hurt, though, Bernie, that you're distancing yourself a little from me. (Laughter.) I mean, that's just not something that you do to your comrade. (Laughter and applause.)<sup>1</sup>

The last joke points to the socialist opening Sanders's campaign cut into US politics. At first glance, the joke seems like red-baiting—Obama's thinly veiled reminder that Sanders was a self-identified socialist and thus unacceptable to the US political class. But perhaps not. Maybe it was a reminder for the audience that Sanders wasn't a member of the Democratic Party, and so he wasn't Obama's party comrade at all. Sanders wanted the Democratic nomination for president but he wasn't actually a Democrat. There is also a third way of reading the joke. Recall how persistently the US right red-baited Obama, accusing him of being a communist or socialist. For eight years, the right excoriated the country's first black president as the most radical left-wing official ever to inhabit the White House. Mocking "Comrade Obama," the right associated Obama with Lenin and Stalin, Che and Mao. Read this way, the joke

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<sup>1</sup> "Here's the Full Transcript of President Obama's Speech at the White House Correspondents' Dinner," *Time*, May 1, 2016, [time.com](http://time.com).

points not to *Sanders* as a comrade but to *Obama* as a comrade. Obama could have been referring to himself as Sanders's comrade, as someone who shares with Sanders a common political horizon, the emancipatory egalitarian horizon denoted by the term comrade. If they were on the same side, with Obama being Sanders's comrade, then Obama should have been able to expect a little solidarity. The joke worked because everybody in the room—from celebrities, to Washington insiders, to media moguls—knew full well that Obama wasn't a comrade. He doesn't come close to sharing Sanders's politics, even if the right can't tell the difference between them.

The term *comrade* indexes a political relation, a set of expectations for action toward a common goal. It highlights the sameness of those on the same side—no matter their differences, comrades stand together. As Obama's joke implies, when you share a politics, you don't generally distance yourself from your comrades. Comradeship binds action, and in this binding, this solidarity, it collectivizes and directs action in light of a shared vision for the future. For communists, this is the egalitarian future of a society emancipated from the determinations of private property and capitalism and reorganized according to the free association, common benefit, and collective decisions of the producers.

But the term comrade predates its use by communists and socialists. In romance languages, comrade first appears in the sixteenth century to designate one who shares a room with another. Juan A. Herrero Brasas cites a Spanish historical-linguistic dictionary's definition of the term: "*Camarada* is someone who is so close to another man that he eats and sleeps in the same house with him."<sup>2</sup> In French, the term was originally feminine, *camarade*, and referred to a barracks or room shared by soldiers.<sup>3</sup> Etymologically, comrade derives from *camera*, the Latin word for room, chamber, and vault. The technical connotation of *vault* indexes a generic function, the structure that produces a particular space and holds it open.<sup>4</sup> A chamber or room is a repeatable structure that takes its form by producing an inside separate from an outside and providing a supported cover for those underneath it. Sharing a room, sharing a space, generates a closeness, an intensity of feeling and expectation

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<sup>2</sup> Juan A. Herrero Brasas, *Walt Whitman's Mystical Ethics of Comradeship*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010, 86.

<sup>3</sup> See the entry for "camarade" in Wiktionary at [en.wiktionary.org](http://en.wiktionary.org).

<sup>4</sup> I'm indebted to Andre Matlock for this point. See also the entry for "comrade" in Wiktionary at [en.wiktionary.org](http://en.wiktionary.org).

of solidarity that differentiates those on one side from those on the other. Comradship is a political relation of supported cover.

Interested in comrade as a mode of address, carrier of expectations, and figure of belonging in the communist and socialist traditions, I emphasize the comrade as a generic figure for the political relation between those on the same side of a political struggle. Comrades are those who tie themselves together instrumentally, for a common purpose: *If we want to win—and we have to win—we must act together*. As Angela Davis describes her decision to join the Communist Party:

I wanted an anchor, a base, a mooring. I needed comrades with whom I could share a common ideology. I was tired of ephemeral ad-hoc groups that fell apart when faced with the slightest difficulty; tired of men who measured their sexual height by women's intellectual genuflection. It wasn't that I was fearless, but I knew that to win, we had to fight and the fight that would win was the one collectively waged by the masses of our people and working people in general. I knew that this fight had to be led by a group, a party with more permanence in its membership and structure and substance in its ideology.<sup>5</sup>

Comrades are those you can count on. You share enough of a common ideology, enough of a commitment to common principles and goals, to do more than one-off actions. Together you can fight the long fight.

As comrades, our actions are voluntary, but they are not always of our own choosing. Comrades have to be able to count on each other even when we don't like each other and even when we disagree. We do what needs to be done because we owe it to our comrades. In *The Romance of American Communism*, Vivian Gornick reports the words of a former member of the Communist Party USA, or CPUSA, who hated the daily grind of selling papers and canvassing expected of party cadre, but nevertheless, according to her, "I did it. I did it because if I didn't do it, I couldn't face my comrades the next day. And we all did it for the same reason: we were accountable to each other."<sup>6</sup> Put in psychoanalytic terms, the comrade functions as an ego ideal: the point from which party members assess themselves as doing

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<sup>5</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*, New York: International Publishers, 1988, 187–8.

<sup>6</sup> Vivian Gornick, *The Romance of American Communism*, New York: Basic Books, 1978, 110.

important, meaningful work.<sup>7</sup> Being accountable to another entails seeing your actions through their eyes. Are you letting them down or are you doing work that they respect and admire?

In *Crowds and Party*, I present the good comrade as an ideal ego, that is to say, as how party members imagine themselves.<sup>8</sup> They may imagine themselves as thrilling orators, brilliant polemicists, skilled organizers, or courageous militants. In contrast with my discussion there, in the current book, I draw out how the comrade also functions as an ego ideal, the perspective that party members—and often fellow travelers—take toward themselves. This perspective is the effect of belonging on the same side as it works back on those who have committed themselves to common struggle. The comrade is a symbolic as well as an imaginary figure and it is the symbolic dimension of ego ideal I focus on here.

My thinking about the comrade as a generic figure for those on the same side flows out of my work on communism as the horizon of left politics and my work on the party as the political form necessary for this politics.<sup>9</sup> To see our political horizon as communist is to highlight the emancipatory egalitarian struggle of the proletarianized against capitalist exploitation—that is, against the determination of life by market forces; by value; by the division of labor (on the basis of sex and race); by imperialism (theorized by Lenin in terms of the dominance of monopoly and finance capital); and by neocolonialism (theorized by Nkrumah as the last stage of imperialism). Today we see this horizon in struggles such as those led by women of color against police violence, white supremacy, and the murder and incarceration of black, brown, and working-class people. We see it in the infrastructure battles around pipelines, climate justice, and barely habitable cities with undrinkable water and contaminated soil. We see it in the array of social reproduction struggles against debt, foreclosure, and privatization, and for free, quality public housing, childcare, education, transportation, healthcare, and other basic services. We see it in the ongoing fight of LGBTQ people against harassment, discrimination, and oppression.

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<sup>7</sup> See Slavoj Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism?,” in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, ed. Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, London: Verso, 2000, 90–135, at 116–7.

<sup>8</sup> Jodi Dean, *Crowds and Party*, London: Verso, 2016, 189.

<sup>9</sup> See Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon*, London: Verso, 2012; and Dean, *Crowds and Party*.

It is readily apparent today that the communist horizon is the horizon of political struggle not for the nation but for the world; it is an international horizon. This is evident in the antagonism between the rights of immigrants and refugees and intensified nationalisms; in the necessity of a global response to planetary warming; and in anti-imperialist, decolonization, and peace movements. In these examples, communism is a force of negativity, the negation of the global capitalist present.

Communism is also the name for the positive alternative to capitalism's permanent and expanding exploitation, crisis, and immiseration, the name of a system of production based on meeting social needs—*from each according to ability to each according to need*, to paraphrase Marx's famous slogan—in a way that is collectively determined and carried out by the producers. This positive dimension of communism attends to social relations, to how people treat each other, animals, things, and the world around them. Building communism entails more than resistance and riot. It requires the emancipated egalitarian organization of collective life.

With respect to the party, intellectuals on the contemporary left tend to extract the party from the aspirations and accomplishments it enabled. Communist philosophers who disagree on a slew of theoretical questions, such as Antonio Negri and Alain Badiou, converge on the organizational question—no party! The party has been rejected as authoritarian, as outmoded, as ill-fitting a society of networks. Every other mode of political association may be revised, renewed, rethought, or reimagined except for the party of communists.

This rejection of the party as a form for left politics is a mistake. It ignores the effects of association on those engaged in common struggle. It fails to learn from the everyday experiences of generations of activists, organizers, and revolutionaries. It relies on a narrow, fantasied notion of the party as a totalitarian machine. It neglects the courage, enthusiasm, and achievements of millions of party members for over a century. Rejection of the party form has been left dogmatism for the last thirty years and has gotten us nowhere.

Fortunately, the movements of the squares in Greece and Spain, as well as lessons from the successes and limits of the Occupy movement, have pushed against this left dogmatism. They have reenergized interest in the party as a political form that can

scale; a form that is flexible, adaptive, and expansive enough to endure beyond the joyous and disruptive moments of crowds in the streets. A theory of the comrade contributes to this renewal by drawing out the ways that shared commitment to a common struggle generates new strengths and new capacities. Over and against the reduction of party relations to the relations between the leaders and the led, comrade attends to the effects of political belonging on those on the same side of a political struggle. As we fight together for a world free of exploitation, oppression, and bigotry, we have to be able to trust and count on each other. Comrade names this relation.

The comrade relation remakes the place from which one sees, what it is possible to see, and what possibilities can appear. It enables the revaluation of work and time, what one does, and for whom one does it. Is one's work done for the people or for the bosses? Is it voluntary or done because one has to work? Does one work for personal provisions or for a collective good? We should recall Marx's lyrical description of communism in which work becomes "life's prime want." We get a glimpse of that in comradeship: one *wants* to do political work. You don't want to let down your comrades; you see the value of your work through their eyes, your new collective eyes. Work, determined not by markets but by shared commitments, becomes fulfilling. French communist philosopher and militant Bernard Aspe discusses the problem of contemporary capitalism as a loss of "common time"; that is, the loss of an experience of time generated and enjoyed through our collective being-together.<sup>10</sup> From holidays, to meals, to breaks, whatever common time we have is synchronized and enclosed in forms for capitalist appropriation. Communicative capitalism's apps and trackers amplify this process such that the time of consumption can be measured in much the same way that Taylorism measured the time of production: How long did a viewer spend on a particular web page? Did a person watch a whole ad or click off of it after five seconds? In contrast, the common action that is the actuality of communist movement induces a collective change in capacities. Breaking from capitalism's 24-7 injunctions to produce and consume for the bosses and owners, the discipline of common struggle expands

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<sup>10</sup> Bernard Aspe, "1917/2017: Revolutions, Communist Legacies and Spectres of the Future," presentation, European University at St. Petersburg, October 24–26, 2017.



possibilities for action and intensifies the sense of its necessity. The comrade is a figure for the relation through which this transformation of work and time occurs.

How do we imagine political work? Under conditions where political change seems completely out of reach, we might imagine political work as self-transformation. At the very least, we can work on ourselves. In the intensely mediated networks of communicative capitalism, we might see our social media engagements as a kind of activism where Twitter and Facebook function as important sites of struggle. Perhaps we understand writing as important political work and hammer out opinion pieces, letters to the editors, and manifestoes. When we imagine political work, we often take electoral politics as our frame of reference, focusing on voting, lawn signs, bumper stickers, and campaign buttons. Or we think of activists as those who arrange phone banks, canvass door-to-door, and set up rallies. In yet another political imaginary, we might envision political work as study, whether done alone or with others. We might imagine political work as cultural production, the building of new communities, spaces, and ways of seeing. Our imaginary might have a militant, or even militarist, inflection: political work is carried out through marches, occupations, strikes, and blockades; through civil disobedience, direct action, and covert operations. Even with the recognition of the wide array of political activities, the ways people use them to respond to specific situations and capacities, and how they combine to enhance each other, we might still imagine radical political work as punching a Nazi in the face.

Throughout these various actions and activities, how are the relations among those fighting on the same side imagined? How do the activists and organizers, militants and revolutionaries relate to one another? During the weeks and months when the Occupy movement was at its peak, relations with others were often infused with a joyous sense of being together, with an enthusiasm for the collective co-creation of new patterns of action and ways of living.<sup>11</sup> But the feeling didn't last. The pressures of organizing diverse people and politics under conditions of police repression and real material need wore down even the most committed activists. Since then, on social media and across the broader left, relations among the politically engaged have again become tense and conflicted, often along lines of race

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<sup>11</sup> Astra Taylor, Keith Gessen, and editors from *n+1*, *Dissent*, *Triple Canopy*, and the *New Republic*, eds., *Occupy! Scenes from Occupied America*, London: Verso, 2011.

and gender. Dispersed and disorganized, we're uncertain of whom to trust and what to expect. We encounter contradictory injunctions to self-care and call out. Suspicion undermines support. Exhaustion displaces enthusiasm.

Attention to comradeship, to the ways that shared expectations make political work not just possible but also gratifying, may help redirect our energies back to our common struggle. As former CPUSA member David Ross explained to Gornick:

I knew that I could never feel passionately about the new movements as I had about the old, I realized that the CP has provided me with a sense of comradeship I would never have again, and that without that comradeship I could *never* be political.<sup>12</sup>

For Ross, the Communist Party is what made Marxism. The party gave Marxism life, political purpose. This life-giving capacity came from comradeship. Ross continues: “The idea of politics as simply a diffused consciousness linked only to personal integrity was—*is*—anathema to me.” His description of politics as “a diffused consciousness linked only to personal integrity” fits today’s left milieu. Perhaps, then, his remedy—comradeship—will as well.

Various people have told me their stories of feeling a rush of warmth when they were first welcomed into their party as a comrade. I’ve had this feeling myself. In his memoir *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*, the theorist Frank Wilderson, a former member of uMkhonto we Sizwe, or MK, the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), describes his first meeting with Chris Hani, the leader of the South African Communist Party and the chief of staff of MK. Wilderson writes, “I beamed like a schoolboy when he called me ‘comrade.’”<sup>13</sup> Wilderson chides himself for what he calls a “childish need for recognition.”<sup>14</sup> Perhaps because he still puts Hani on a pedestal, he feels exposed in his enjoyment of the egalitarian disruption of comradeship. Wilderson hasn’t yet internalized the idea that he and Hani are political equals. “Comrade” holds out an equalizing promise, and when that

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<sup>12</sup> Gornick, *Romance of American Communism*, 202.

<sup>13</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015, 275.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

promise is fulfilled, we confront our own continuing yet unwanted attachments to hierarchy, prestige, inadequacy. Accepting equality takes courage.

Wilderson's joy in hearing Hani call him "comrade" contrasts sharply with another instance Wilderson recounts where comrade was the term of address. In 1994, shortly before Wilderson was forced to leave South Africa, he encountered Nelson Mandela at an event hosted by *Tribute* magazine. After Mandela's public remarks, Wilderson asked a question in which he addressed Mandela as "comrade." "Not Mr. Mandela. Not sir, like the fawning advertising mogul who asked the first question. Comrade Mandela. It stitched him back into the militant garb he'd shed since the day he left prison."<sup>15</sup> Wilderson's recollection shows how comrade's equalizing insistence can be aggressive, an imposition of discipline. This is part of its power. Addressing another as "comrade" reminds them that something is expected of them.

Discipline and joy are two sides of the same coin, two aspects of comradeship as a mode of political belonging. As a form of address, figure of political relation, and carrier of expectations, comrade disrupts capitalist society's hierarchical identifications of sex, race, and class. It insists on the equalizing sameness of those on the same side of a political struggle and renders that equalizing sameness productive of new modes of work and belonging. In this respect, comrade is a carrier of utopian longings in the sense theorized by Kathi Weeks. Weeks presents the utopian form as carrying out two functions: "One function is to alter our connection to the present, while the other is to shift our relationship to the future; one is productive of estrangement, the other of hope."<sup>16</sup> The first function mobilizes the negativity of disidentification and disinvestment. Present relations become strange, less binding on our sense of possibility. The second function redirects "our attention and energies toward an open future ... providing a vision or glimmer of a better world."<sup>17</sup> The power of comrade is in how it negates old relations and promises new ones—the promise itself ushers them in, welcoming the new comrade into relations irreducible to their broader setting.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 464.

<sup>16</sup> Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011, 204–5.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 206.

## *Survivors and Systems*

This book offers a theory of the comrade as a figure for the political relation between those on the same side. It contrasts with two opposing tendencies dominant in contemporary left theory and activism, tendencies that emphasize survivors and systems. The emphasis on survivors appears in social media, academic environments, and some activist networks. It is voiced through intense attachment to identity and appeals to allyship, as I explore below. The emphasis on systems predominates in aesthetic and conceptual venues as a posthumanist concern with geology, extinction, algorithms, “hyperobjects,” biosystems, and planetary exhaustion.<sup>18</sup> So on the one side, we have survivors, those with nothing left to cling to but their identities, often identities forged through struggles to survive and attached to the pain and trauma of these struggles.<sup>19</sup> And on the other, we have systems, processes operating at a scale so vast, so complex, that we can scarcely conceive of them, let alone affect them.<sup>20</sup> This book presents an alternative to both.

These two tendencies correspond to neoliberal capitalism’s dismantling of social institutions, and to the intensification of capitalism via networked, personalized digital media and informatization that I call “communicative capitalism.”<sup>21</sup> More and more people are experiencing more and more economic uncertainty, insecurity, and instability. Good jobs are harder to find and easier to lose. Fewer people can count on long-term employment, or expect that benefits like quality healthcare and adequate provision for retirement will be part of their compensation. Unions are smaller and weaker. Wages are stagnant. Housing is unaffordable and inadequate. Schools and universities face cuts to budgets and faculty, additions of administrators and students, astronomical tuition increases, more debt, and less respect. Pummeled by competition, debt, and the general dismantling of the remnants of public and infrastructural supports, families crumble. Neoliberal ideology glosses the situation

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<sup>18</sup> Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Wendy Brown, “Wounded Attachments,” *Political Theory* 21: 3, August 1993, 390–410. See also Robin D. G. Kelley’s critique of black student activists’ embrace of the language of personal trauma, in Robin D. G. Kelley, “Black Study, Black Struggle,” *Boston Review*, March 7, 2016, [bostonreview.net](http://bostonreview.net).

<sup>20</sup> Jodi Dean, “The Anamorphic Politics of Climate Change,” *e-flux* 69, January 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Jodi Dean, “Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics,” *Cultural Politics* 1: 1, 2005, 51–74.

as one where individuals have more choice and more opportunity to exercise personal responsibility.

Carl Schmitt famously characterized liberalism as replacing politics with ethics and economics.<sup>22</sup> Correlatively, we should note the displacement of politics specific to neoliberalism. There is individualized self-cultivation, self-management, self-reliance, self-absorption, and—at the same time—impersonal determining processes, circuits, and systems. We have responsible individuals, individuals who are responsabilized, treated as loci of autonomous choices and decisions, and we have individuals encountering situations that are utterly determining and outside their control. Instead of ethics and economics, neoliberalism's displacement of politics manifests in the opposition between survivors and systems. The former struggle to persist in conditions of unlivability rather than to seize and transform these conditions. The latter are systems and “hyperobjects” determining us, often aesthetic objects or objects of a future aesthetics, things to view and diagram and predict and perhaps even mourn, but not to affect.<sup>23</sup>

Survivors experience their vulnerability. Some even come to cherish it, to derive their sense of self from being able to survive against all that is stacked against them. Sociologist Jennifer Silva interviewed a number of working-class young adults in Massachusetts and Virginia.<sup>24</sup> Many emphasized their self-reliance. They did so in part because their experience told them that other people were likely to continue to fail or betray them. To survive, they could count only on themselves. Some of the people described struggles with illness, battles with addiction, and challenges with overcoming dysfunctional families and abusive relationships. For them, the fight to survive is the key feature of an identity imagined as dignified and heroic because it has to produce itself by itself.

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<sup>22</sup> Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, expanded ed., trans. George Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

<sup>23</sup> In addition to Morton, *Hyperobjects*, see Benjamin Bratton, “Some Trace Effects of the Post-Anthropocene: On Accelerationist Geopolitical Aesthetics,” *e-flux* 46, June 2013, [e-flux.com](http://e-flux.com).

<sup>24</sup> Jennifer M. Silva, *Coming Up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Accounts of systems are typically devoid of survivors.<sup>25</sup> Human lives don't matter. The presumption that they matter is taken to be an epistemological failure or ontological crime in need of remedy. Bacteria and rocks, planetary or even galactic processes, are what need to be taken into account, brought in to redirect thought away from anthropocentric hubris. When people appear, they are the problem, a planetary excess that needs to be curtailed, a destructive species run amok, the glitch of life.

The opposition between survivors and systems gives us a left devoid of politics. Both tendencies render class struggle—the divisive struggle over common conditions on behalf of an emancipatory egalitarian future—unintelligible. In the place of the political struggle of the proletarianized, we have the fragmenting assertion of particularity, of unique survival, and an obsession with the encroaching, unavoidable impossibility of survival. Politics is effaced in the impasse of individualized survivability under conditions of generalized non-survival, of extinction.

However strong the survivors and systems tendencies may be on the contemporary left, our present setting still provides openings for politics. Here are four. First, communicative capitalism is marked by the power of many, of number. Capitalist and state power emphasizes big data and the knowledge generated by finding correlations in enormous data sets. Social media is driven by the power of number: how many friends and followers, how many shares and retweets? On the streets and in the movements, we see further emphasis on number—the many who are rioting, demonstrating, occupying, blockading. As over a century of working-class struggle has demonstrated, the power of the people is in asserting the power that the many have over the few—if the people can get organized and join together enough to take the struggle on. A second opening exists in identity losing its ability to ground a left politics. No political conclusions follow from the assertion of a specific identity. On the left, attributions of identity are being immediately complicated, critiqued, and even rejected as activists build commonalities across struggles. Advancing nationalisms throughout the world suggest that today identity

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<sup>25</sup> I have in mind here inquiries focused on extinction, algorithms, post-humanism, and the planetary. See, for example, the contributions to *After Extinction*, Richard Grusin, ed., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

is more likely to be appealed to by the right. Yet again, the right repeats its age-old tactic of stealing left themes and programs, now forwarding an identity politics of its own: white supremacy in the United States, Brexit in the UK, Hindu nationalism, and Israel's declaration that it is the nation-state of the Jewish people are but a few examples. The third opening relates to the astronomical increase in demands on our attention that circulate in communicative capitalism, for which a series of communicative shortcuts have emerged: hashtags, memes, emojis, and reaction GIFs, as well as linguistic patterns optimized for search engines (lists, questions, indicators, hooks, and lures).<sup>26</sup> These shortcuts point to the prominence of generic markers—common images and symbols that facilitate communicative flow, keeping circulation fluid. If we had to read, much less think about, everything we share online, our social media networks would slow down and clog up. In this setting, the generic serves as a container for multiplicities of incommunicable contents. Common symbols enable new connections between struggles; common names let people understand their local issues as instances of something larger, something global. In the fourth opening, the movements themselves have come up against the limits of horizontality, individuality, and rhetorics of allyship that presuppose fixed identities and interests. The response has been renewed interest in the politics of parties and questions of the party form, renewed emphasis on organizing the proletarianized many. Cutting through and across the impasse of survivor and system is a new turn toward the arrangements of the many, the institutions of the common, and the struggles of the exploited.<sup>27</sup>

This is the context in which I present a theory of the comrade. The comrade figures a political relation that shifts us away from preoccupations with survivors and systems, away from the suppositions of unique particularity and the impossibility of politics, and toward the sameness of those fighting on the same side. It draws out the demands on and expectations of those engaged in emancipatory egalitarian political struggle. Comradeship engenders discipline, joy, courage, and enthusiasm, as I explore further in chapter three. If the left is as committed to radical change as we claim, we have to be comrades.

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<sup>26</sup> Jodi Dean, "Faces as Commons: The Secondary Visuality of Communicative Capitalism," Open! Platform for Art, Culture, and the Public Domain, December 31, 2016, [onlineopen.org](http://onlineopen.org).

<sup>27</sup> Not An Alternative, "Institutional Liberation," *e-flux* 77, November 2016, [e-flux.com](http://e-flux.com); Jonas Staal, "Assemblism," *e-flux* 80, March 2017, [e-flux.com](http://e-flux.com).

## *From Allies to Comrades*

For some contemporary readers, comrade as a term of address might seem jarring, out of place. In the United States, perhaps the term is too alien to American political culture. In Europe, the term might seem too Stalinist, too old school, and too restrictive. Terms like “colleague,” implying less commitment and fitting more easily into the European Union’s capitalist setting, may be more commonly used and feel more comfortable. These views are not entirely without merit.

The US-based hesitation nevertheless ignores the history of socialism and communism in the United States. And the broader hesitation needs to be associated with the defeat of the Soviet Union, intense neoliberalization, and capitalist ideology’s cult of individual identity. In a context theorized as post-political and postdemocratic, the personal—what the individual experiences, feels, and risks—has turned into the privileged site of political engagement. Given neoliberalism’s subjection of public and political practices and institutions to market demands this is not surprising. But what the left has claimed as a victory is the symptom of its defeat: the erosion of working-class political power and the accompanying decay of its political parties. The claim that the term comrade doesn’t ring true is thus more symptomatic than it is descriptive. It attests to a situation that has to be changed, a problem that needs to be solved, and an organization that must be built.

When identity is all that is left, hanging on to it can be a sensible response. At the very least—and against all odds—one survives. But as Silva discovered in her interviews with working-class adults, people can become so attached to their identity as survivors that they lack the capacity to criticize and challenge the conditions under which they are forced to struggle. Because these conditions, generally those of racialized patriarchal capitalism, are taken for granted, figured as either contingent or immutable, survival itself appears as the real political achievement.<sup>28</sup> Attachment to identity is nevertheless pathological. It’s an attachment to a fantasy of wholeness or certainty, to the illusion of that pure site that can guarantee that we are right, that we are on the side of the angels. The fantasy blocks from view the way that identities

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<sup>28</sup> This may also account for the popularity of the slogan “Nevertheless, she persisted” among US white feminists after Elizabeth Warren was interrupted and chastised for criticizing Alabama senator Jeff Sessions’s civil rights record during the Senate hearings for his confirmation as US attorney general. Nevertheless, he was confirmed.



are themselves split, contested, sites of class struggle. That someone identifies as a woman, as black, as transgender, or as a survivor tells us nothing about their politics.

That identities are sites of struggle rather than grounds of struggle is clear when we consider allyship. Despite its association with sovereign nations involved in wartime alliances, the term *ally* has become influential in US left activist circles. For at least five years, there has been intense discussion on social media and university campuses as well as among community organizers about what it means to be an ally and who can be an ally. Generally, allies are privileged people who want to do something about oppression. They may not consider themselves survivors or victims, but they want to help. So allies can be straight people who stand up for LGBTQ people, white people who support black and brown people, men who defend women, and so on. I have yet to see the term used for rich people involved in working-class struggle. Allies don't want to imagine themselves as homophobic, racist, or sexist. They see themselves as the good guys, part of the solution.

As is frequently emphasized in debates around allyship, claiming to be an ally does not make one an ally. Allyship is a process requiring time and effort. People have to work at it. It is not an identity. Much of the written and video work on allyship is thus didactic and instructional. It takes the form of a how-to guide or list of pointers—how to be an ally, the dos and don'ts of allyship, and so on. Like eliminate-the-clutter books or tips for clean eating, the instructions for being a good ally are mini lifestyle manuals, techniques for navigating the neoliberal environment of privilege and oppression. Individuals can learn what not to say and what not to do. They can feel engaged, changing their feelings if not the world without taking power, without any organized political struggle at all. The “politics” in these allyship how-tos consists of interpersonal interactions, individuated feelings, and mediated affects.

The pieces on how to be a good ally that circulate online (as blog posts, videos, editorials, and handouts for courses or campuses) address the viewer or reader as an individual with a privileged identity who wants to operate in solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed. As I detail below, this potential ally is positioned as wanting to know what they can do right now, on their own, and in their everyday lives to combat racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression. The ally's field of operation is often imagined as social media (in knowing the right way

to respond to racist or homophobic remarks on Twitter, for example); as charitable contribution (in donating to and setting up GoFundMe campaigns); as professional interaction (in hiring the marginalized and promoting the oppressed); as conversations at one's school or university (in knowing what not to say); and, sometimes, as street-level protests (in not dominating someone else's event). Even more often, the ally's own individual disposition, attitude, and behavior constitute the presumed operational field. The how-to guide instructs allies on how to feel, think, and act if they want to consider themselves as people who are on the side of the oppressed. Their awareness is what needs to change.

For example, as the open-source "Guide to Allyship," created in 2016 by Amelie Lamont, a self-identified cisgendered black woman who experienced the betrayal of a white ally who failed to support her in a confrontation with a racist, explains:

To be an ally is to: Take on the struggle as your own. Stand up, even when you feel scared. Transfer the benefits of your privilege to those who lack it. Acknowledge that while you, too, feel pain, the conversation is not about you.<sup>29</sup>

Here allyship is a matter of the self, of what the self acknowledges, of the individual who stands alone, and of this single individual taking on a struggle that properly belongs to another. It's as if struggles were possessions—artifacts that individuals take on, over, and into themselves—all while being urged to see these acquisitions as something to which they, as the ally, have no right. At the same time, exactly what the struggle is, what the politics is, remains opaque, unstated, and a matter of the individual's feeling, attitude, or comfort level.

Here's another example from a BuzzFeed post titled "How to Be a Better Ally: An Open Letter to White Folks." The text is from a letter sent by a producer of the BuzzFeed video series, "Another Round," in reply to a question from a white person about being an ally.

Have you ever had a conversation with a feminist man come grinding to a halt because he starts to complain about how feminists use language that excludes men, even the feminist men? ("Not all men ...") I have! Being a good ally often means not being included in the conversation, because the conversation isn't

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<sup>29</sup> "Guide to Allyship," [guidetoallyship.com](http://guidetoallyship.com).

about you. It's good to listen. If you feel uncomfortable and excluded because you're white, you should own those feelings.<sup>30</sup>

Again, allyship is a disposition, a confrontation not with state or capitalist power but with one's own discomfort. To be an ally is to work to cultivate in oneself habits of proper listening, to decenter oneself, to step aside and become aware of the lives and experiences of others.

Karolina Szczur's essay "Fundamentals of Effective Allyship," originally delivered as a talk at Tech Inclusion Melbourne, configures allyship in terms of the intensity of the ally's feelings and whether the ally is willing and able to undertake the necessary self-work:

It's our responsibility to recognize, identify and act on the privilege we have. One of the ways of doing so is committing to an ongoing act of introspection, reflection and learning. You will find yourself challenged, uncomfortable, even defensive, but the more intense these feelings are, the more likely it is you're on the right track.<sup>31</sup>

Acting on privilege appears here as an interior act, an act of the self on the self. One's politics may be entirely in one's head. The ally is imaginary, not symbolic; an ideal ego or idealized version of who we want to be rather than an ego ideal or perspective from which we evaluate ourselves. In this respect, allyship reflects the shrinking or decline of the political. The space for politics has decreased yet the ally feels the need to act, desperately, intensely, and now. They act in and on what is available—social media, and themselves.

The process of becoming aware reiterates a key injunction of communicative capitalism: Educate yourself. Google it. Don't ask or burden the oppressed. The online magazine *Everyday Feminism* provides a list of ten things allies need to know. Number five on the list is: "Allies Educate Themselves Constantly." It explains:

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<sup>30</sup> Another Round, Tracy Clayton, and Heben Nigatu, "How to Be a Better Ally: An Open Letter to White Folks," BuzzFeed- News, December 30, 2015, [buzzfeednews.com](https://www.buzzfeednews.com).

<sup>31</sup> Karolina Szczur, "Fundamentals of Effective Allyship," Medium, February 12, 2018, [medium.com](https://www.medium.com).

One of the most important types of education is listening ... but there are endless resources (books, blogs, media outlets, speakers, YouTube videos, etc.) to help you learn. *What you should not do, though, is expect those with whom you want to ally yourself to teach you.* That is not their responsibility. Sure, listen to them when they decide to drop some knowledge or perspective, but do not go to them and expect them to explain their oppression for you.<sup>32</sup>

The process of educating oneself is isolating, individuating. Learning is modeled as consuming information, not as discussion; coming to a common understanding; or studying the texts and documents of a political tradition. Educating oneself is disconnected from a collective critical practice, detached from political positions or goals. Criteria according to which one might evaluate books, blogs, speakers, and videos are absent. It's up to the individual ally to figure it out on their own. In effect, there is punishment without discipline. The would-be ally can be scolded and shamed, even as the scolder is relieved of any responsibility to provide concrete guidance and training (let's be clear, just telling someone to "Google it" is an empty gesture). Once we recall that "ally" is not a term of address—it doesn't replace "Mr.," "Ms.," "Dr.," or "Professor"; the term ally appears more to designate a limit, suggesting that you will never be one of us, than it does to enable solidarity. The relation between allies and those they are allies for, or to, is between those with separate interests, experiences, and practices.

The eighth item on the list of things allies need to know is: "Allies Focus on Those Who Share Their Identity." "Beyond listening, *arguably the most important thing that I can do to act in solidarity is to engage those who share my identity.*"<sup>33</sup> Identities appear clear and fixed, unambiguous and unchanging. Individuals are like little sovereign states, defending their territory, and only joining together under the most cautious and self-interested terms. Those taken to share an identity are presumed to share a politics, as if the identity were obvious and the politics didn't need to be built. Those willing to forward a politics other than one anchored in what can easily be ascribed to their identity are treated with suspicion, mistrusted for their presumed privilege, and criticized in advance for the array of wrongs that preserve

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<sup>32</sup> Jamie Utt, "So You Call Yourself an Ally: 10 Things All 'Allies' Need to Know," *Everyday Feminism*, November 8, 2013, [everydayfeminism.com](http://everydayfeminism.com). Italics in original as boldface.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. Italics in original as boldface.

that privilege. The very terms of allyship reinforce the mistrust that the how-to-better guides purport to address: it makes sense to mistrust people who view politics as immediate gratification, as an individualized quick fix to long histories of structural oppression. Because allies join together under self-interested terms, they can easily withdraw, drop out, let us down. We can't be sure of their commitment because it hinges on their individual feelings and comfort. Item eight in the article ("Allies Focus on Those Who Share Their Identity") tells us why allyship has such a hold in progressive circles: Mistrust of other identities becomes functional and gratifying in the name of a politics that maintains and polices identity, our own special and vulnerable thing, shoring up its weak and porous boundaries. "Ally" keeps attention away from the fearsome challenge of choosing a side, from accepting the discipline that comes from collective work, and from organizing for the abolition of racial patriarchal capitalism and the state designed to secure it.

So rather than bridging political identities or articulating a politics that moves beyond identity, allyship is a symptom of the displacement of politics into the individualist self-help techniques and social media moralism of communicative capitalism. The underlying vision is of self-oriented individuals, politics as possession, transformation reduced to attitudinal change, and a fixed, naturalized sphere of privilege and oppression. Anchored in a view of identity as the primary vector of politics, the emphasis on allies displaces attention away from strategic organizational and tactical questions and onto prior attitudinal litmus tests, from the start precluding the collectivity necessary for revolutionary left politics. Of course, those on the left need allies. Sometimes it is necessary to forge temporary alliances in order to advance. A struggle with communism as its horizon will involve an array of tactical alliances among different classes, sectors, and tendencies. But provisional allies focused on their own interests are not the same as comrades—although they might become comrades. My critique of the ally as the symptom and limit of contemporary identity politics should thus not be taken as a rejection of practices of alliance in the course of political struggle. That would be absurd. I am rejecting allyship as the form and model for struggles against oppression, immiseration, dispossession, and exploitation.

Communicative capitalism enjoins uniqueness. We are commanded to be ourselves, express ourselves, do it ourselves. Conforming, copying, and letting

another speak for us are widely thought to be somehow bad, indicative of weakness, ignorance, or unfreedom. The impossibility of an individual politics, the fact that political change is always and only collective, is suppressed, displaced into the inchoate conviction that we are determined by systems and forces completely outside our capacity to affect them. Climate changes. Not us.

If we recognize that the attachment to individual identity is the form of our political incapacity, we can acquire new capacities for action, the collective capacities of those on the same side of a struggle. We can become more than allies who are concerned with defending our own individual identity and lecturing others on what they must do to aid us in this defense. We can become comrades struggling together to change the world. I thus agree with Mark Fisher's crucial reminder: "We need to learn, or re-learn, how to build comradeship and solidarity instead of doing capital's work for it by condemning and abusing each other."<sup>34</sup>

Where the ally is hierarchical, specific, and acquiescent, the comrade is egalitarian, generic, and utopian. The egalitarian and generic dimensions of comrade are what make it utopian, what enable the relation between comrades to cut through the determinations of the everyday (which is another way of saying capitalist social relations). In the following chapter, I take up potential objections to this idea of a generic comrade. My examples there and throughout the book draw largely, but not exclusively, from the Communist Party of the United States. Given that there have been communist parties and organizations in virtually every country in the world, the examples could have come from almost anywhere. Most parties have encountered similar problems at one time or another. I use examples from the United States because they demonstrate how even this intensely individualist, capitalist, racist, Cold War political culture produced a mode of political belonging that can serve as an alternative to allyship. My aim is to surface another possible history, one made by comrades in settings internally divided and seemingly far from revolution, settings not unlike our own.

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<sup>34</sup> Mark Fisher, "Exiting the Vampire Castle," *openDemocracy*, November 24, 2013, [opendemocracy.net](http://opendemocracy.net).