

## Wilderness House Literary Review 20/1

**Capital's Grave** by Jodi Dean, Verso Books, London, 2025. 169 pages.

The New Era of Lords and Serfs

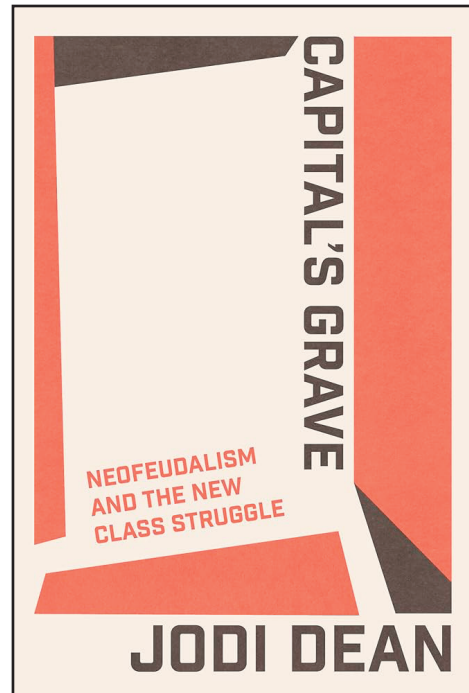
*Review by Ed Meek*

Jodi Dean, an American political theorist and professor in the Political Science

Department at Hobart and William Smith College, made the news last year when she lost her position because she expressed her pro-Palestinian stance on campus. She has since been reinstated. Although Bernie, AOC and the Squad, and other progressive democrats, are characterized by Republicans as radicals, they are really center-left politicians willing to work within the system to enact change. Jodi Dean is a radical who wants a different system. She is not alone. Many Americans on the left and right want major changes. Hence the return of Trump.

In the light of the recent election, it seems like an apt time to consider what exactly has gotten us to this state of affairs. A majority of American voters asserted their displeasure with the status quo and voted for the candidate who promised change including among other things, lower inflation, the deportation of undocumented immigrants, cracking down on crime, tariffs on imports, an America-first foreign policy, banning trans-persons from sports teams and bathrooms, allowing states to determine polices on abortion, and cutting government jobs. The first three of these objectives are the salient ones for his supporters according to polls. Whether Trump will make headway on any of them is up in the air. In any case, Americans, like many other voters in the world, expressed their unhappiness and anger with the government by voting in the opposition.

Jodi Dean in her short book makes an interesting argument as to why this has occurred and what she thinks should be done about it. The title refers to the end of capitalism and the advent of a new era of feudalism. Dean explains that capitalism is based on the premise that we produce goods and sell them for profit. As a company develops, productivity should rise and the company should reinvest to create better products. Workers will be rewarded as profits increase. But global trade destroyed much of American manufacturing, and although it brought cheap goods, it wiped out many jobs. In addition, automation has reduced the need for factory workers. What we are left with is mostly services. Jobs are plentiful in healthcare, education, restaurant work, sales, law. And they include the new "gig" economy of drivers, food and product deliverers, air B&B landlords, influencers, etc. These jobs are touted as side-hustles that af-



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ford practitioners freedom and choice, but the workers have few rights and no benefits. The big winners in our winner-takes-all economy are the owners. Meanwhile, the workers are serfs who suffer “catastrophic anxiety” constantly worried about bankruptcy or losing their job or finding the rent raised or dealing with a pandemic. Service jobs are dependent on the economy and the workers are what Marx calls surplus people, needed when the economy is robust and laid off during a slowdown.

In addition, companies no longer invest profits in research and development. Instead, they buy back their own stock raising dividends for themselves, and they use profits to lobby politicians for favorable tax laws. They find no-tax zones like Ireland and move their headquarters there. Amazon gets tax breaks from cities and states for the promise of providing jobs. The latest scam by Musk and Trump involves investing in cryptocurrency and inviting others to do so to increase their own net worth. Sarah Kendzior (*Hiding in Plain Sight*) describes this as kleptocracy. The point is, this isn't actually capitalism; it's the extraction of wealth.

Dean refers to the owners as lords and the workers as serfs in what she calls neo-feudalism. The Trump administration, staffed with billionaires including Elon Musk, the richest man in the world, and Trump himself, a reputed billionaire, are our lords and we are their serfs. The characterization is apt for those millions of Americans who rent an apartment, purchase a car with loans, get health insurance through Obamacare, and live paycheck to paycheck with credit card debt and/or college loans to pay off each month. With an average household income of 80K in the US, this would fit the 50% of the country earning less than the average. With inflation and high interest rates, even Americans earning more than the average income find it difficult to keep up with the bills.

Wealth continues to become more and more concentrated with the top 1% holding 30% of the total net worth. The top 10% holds 60% of the wealth. The bottom half controls less than 3%. Dean's position is that capitalism just doesn't work for most of us and needs to be replaced.

The answer, she tells us, is communism with “Universal Basic Services” providing healthcare, housing, education, and good jobs bolstered by unions. Unpaid “reproductive labor” like motherhood and caring for family and elders, and housework, would be included in what constitutes work. A key element of communism is the abolition of private property. Nearly all land is now privately owned: “in the US 100 families own about 42 million acres” according to Dean. How the abolition of private property would work out is puzzling. “From each according to his ability to each according to his needs,” said Marx. Dean claims we will have to make such a radical change to address climate change and thrive in the future.

In the next four years, it will be interesting to observe how Americans deal with the many changes Trump and friends are promising. Whether Americans are ready to demand the government provide us with universal basic services, and whether service jobs will evolve into good jobs with adequate wages and benefits is a big question. Jodi Dean's new book gives us plenty to talk about.