

## CYNICISM

*Horst Hutter*

---

Peter Sloterdijk. *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*. Frankfurt/Main Suhrkamp Verlag, Neue Folge, Band 99, 1983; 2 Volumes, 954 pp.

---

If Oscar Wilde's judgment of our world is valid, as expressed in his definition of "cynicism" (as) "merely the art of seeing things as they are instead of as they ought to be", then philosophy and critical theory have been inadequate in making us understand and cope with this world. The enormity of the dangers confronting our civilization on all sides, putting into question the very survival of mankind, the hopeless fumbling and blindness of our leaders of every political persuasion in face of imminent disaster, and the massive stupidity and gullibility to be found among the electorates of democracies, make the concepts devised by philosophers to analyse these phenomena appear insufficient. Thus, ideas such as the "legitimation crisis", the "banality of evil", "radical evil", "the gnostic dreamworld", the "general crisis of capitalism" and even the concept of nihilism are all still too rooted in theologies of hope and human power and in projecting images of how the world should be. They do not explain sufficiently how these crises arose, because they do not match the cynicism of events with a realism of concepts. In part they are based on assumptions about the subject of human history and the efficacy of human willing which also underlie the very mechanisms that have brought us to this turning point in the history of the planet. Thereby they unwittingly add to, rather than diminish, our problems.

The crisis of our culture is simultaneously the crisis of philosophy as critical theory. Given this state of affairs, Walter Benjamin believed that our age had entered the twilight of critique because events are too close to our skins to permit us the distance necessary for a critical judgment of them. *Nostra res agitur*. Unless one contents oneself with a positivistic affirmation of things as they are or their ideological obfuscation, one is better to remain silent, for the moment of verbal negation has passed. Nevertheless, Peter Sloterdijk's exhilarating and profound recent book on the structures of cynical reason seems to throw a flash of illumination into this twilight of critique and culture. It achieves what one would have no longer believed possible, that is to adorn the dying tree of philosophy with new foliage.

Sloterdijk quotes with approval Benjamin's contention that the events in which we are implicated are so burning as to deny us the very possibility of a

standpoint outside them. Hence one cannot achieve an impartial vision. In this state of affairs, Sloterdijk holds that it is nevertheless possible to continue the project of critical theory, not by assuming a free and objective perspective, but from a perspective which expresses the burning pain that events impose on us. Thus, all subjectivities are concerned in the a-priori of suffering which permits us, if not an impartial, at least a common perspective. Suffering implies a knowledge of the world which needs to find its voice in a theory. Critique is possible insofar as pain tells us what is true and what is false, provided that too much suffering has not destroyed our sensibilities. This attitude which underlies the author's analysis of cynicism is hence not at the same "height" assumed by traditional philosophy in the spirit of the Socrates canonized by the various Platonisms and by Christianity. Rather, it is an attitude of closest proximity to events, a micrology which takes its inspiration from that other Socrates, the *mainoumenos*, or mad and raving Socrates whose myth is associated with the figure of Diogenes.

Sloterdijk is careful to distinguish the philosophical movement of the ancient kynics from the modern concept of cynicism. While the two are inextricably linked — their separation dates only from the beginning of the last century — their inner affinity as well as their profound contradictions are as such highly revealing of the nature of our culture. In this regard Sloterdijk bases his analysis on an excellent earlier work on the figure of Diogenes the Kynic and modern cynicism, Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting's *Der Kynismus des Diogenes und der Begriff des Zynismus* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1979). Cynicism is a name that characterises the terrible moral ambiguity of all aspects of life in this age of nihilism. It is connected to the ancient philosophy of Kynism, which represents a different aspect of the Socratic impulse, by way of a cultural filiation and transformation which might itself be termed cynical.

Kynism, normally associated with the figures of Antisthenes and Diogenes, was a movement of philosophical critique inspired by Socrates and continuing and surpassing his ironical attacks on the way of life of the polis. It was a plebeian philosophy linking elements of what later would be called dialectical materialism with existentialism in an attack on the perversions of the social order and its idealistic distortions. It continued the demand of Socrates that philosophy be lived and embodied rather than merely theorised, by developing a way of arguing philosophically by means of gestures and satirical and physical demonstrations. Thus it provided a means of incorporating those elements of human nature that by virtue of their position "below" had been repressed and defined away from "above" by the dogmatically hardened idealisms of the Socratic impulse centered around the canonized Socrates. It was the plebeian antithesis to the aristocratic philosophy of the masters of the schools, which invoked repressed nature against repressive conventions and thus insured the public return of the repressed. In publicising repressed elements by means of animalistic gestures, it achieved a style of argument that was based on the unity in one act of a mode of demonstration with a mode of universalisation. It thus became an artistic rival to the theoretical mode of the idealistic Socratic

## CYNICISM

discourse, by imitating the semantic system of art as unity of demonstration and universalisation.

The critical impulse thus created chiefly by the figure of Diogenes radiated out and resurged throughout the history of Western civilization in the forms of satire and critiques that undermined the dogmatic fixations and fraudulent pretensions of the closed world of merely theoretical discourse. As a kynic impulse it was always associated with the standpoints of the excluded, the repressed and forgotten, pitting the antithesis from "below" against the ideological affirmations from "above". When, however, the effort of the kynic impulse to say the naked truth and to forego the universal pretension that the emperor wore clothes was adopted by the lords and masters as a position of defense, then it became cynicism. Cynicism is the kynic impulse which has changed sides. It arises when the standpoint of the "above" also engages in truth-telling, in saying things as they really are, without renouncing in practice its repression and distortion of the whole. Cynicism is the honesty of oppressive masters who for a comment talk out of school and adopt the impudence of the slaves as a strategy of oppression.

The drive for truth as demonstrated by the proverbial boldness of the kynics expressed and embodied the real energies of the repressed strata of society. Thereby a reality is created which can only be fought but cannot be denied. It implies an ability to say no to the unnatural conditions of life created by repressive orders. It is an affirmation of freedom from below. The same kind of bold truth-telling by the powerful, by contrast, becomes the cynical antithesis to the idealisms and ideologies that mask political reality. "The cynical master lifts his mask for a moment, smiles at his weak opponent — and continues to suppress him. *C'est la vie. Noblesse oblige. We must have order...* It is not David who challenges Goliath, but the Goliathes of all times — from the arrogant Assyrian kings to modern bureaucrats — who show to brave but hopeless Davids just where up and down are located; it is cynicism in the service of the public." (p. 222) In this sense cynicism is enlightened false consciousness.

False consciousness that is enlightened implies a simultaneous affirmation and denial of fundamental values. Truths are acknowledged theoretically and denied practically. This schizoid structure of consciousness was once reserved to "great statesmen... who were free enough to become kynics, so as to play coolly with means and ends... Today every fonctionnaire and backbencher is as versed in this as Talleyrand, Metternich and Bismark put together." (pp. 224-225). Today we live in times in which "basic values" have become indistinguishable from subterfuges. The servant of order

is quite capable of doing with his right hand what the left hand would never permit... he is functionally an agent of capital, but intentionally a democrat; in regard to the system a fonctionnaire of reification but in his life-world a self-realiser; objectively a carrier of destruction, subjectively a pacifist; in himself the unchainer of catastrophes, but for himself harmlessness itself. Everything is possible with schizoids.

## HORST HUTTER

In this world of clever instinctive conformists the body of the enlightened servant of order says no to the constraints imposed by his mind, and the mind negates the manner in which the body purchases itself its comfortable self-preservation. This mixture is our moral status quo. (p. 225)

The all-pervasiveness of enlightened false consciousness is the result of the corruption of the resurgences in Western history of the kynic impulses. The class structures have been flexible enough to absorb the kynic energies and integrate them into mixtures of truth and falsehood. Historically, most resurgences of the kynic impulse have been linked to the rise to power of the bourgeoisie. In its pre-power phase the bourgeoisie adopted Kynism as a successful strategy. After assuming power, bourgeois intellectuals transformed Kynism into cynicism. Sloterdijk traces this movement from kynism to cynicism in the theory and practice of early bourgeois art as well as in the eight stages of enlightenment philosophy.

Modern art, as beginning in the Renaissance and revived in the period of the *sturm und drang* strove to incorporate the sensuous totality of man. Both in theory and practice artists in these periods saw themselves as upholders and vindicators of a world of wholeness in the midst of self-division and disunity in the political realm. Unfortunately, the sensuous totality of man remained confined to the realm of beautiful seeming, and all attempts to translate the beautiful into actuality were fictionalised. Thus the arising of a Bohemian subculture and a simultaneous movement toward art for art's sake was able to contain and render harmless the explosive potential of early bourgeois art.

Similarly, the kynic critiques of the established order in the various stages of enlightenment were transformed into cynical affirmations. Sloterdijk distinguishes eight such stages or waves of critique beginning with the critique of revelation in Lessing's philosophical analysis of the sacred Christian texts which undercuts the claim that these texts constitute the absolute word of transcendence. This critique was followed by the critique of religious illusions which unmasks the various attempts to define the undefinable as naive projections of imminent images into transcendence. Despite both of these critiques, organised religions with their claims to absolute and revealed knowledge simply continue to exist. They have even been strengthened, in so far as the tools of critical analysis developed by enlightened philosophers have been accepted among the instruments of faith. "Perhaps religion is indeed an incurable ontological psychosis (Ricoeur), and the Furies of displacing critique must tire before the eternal recurrence of the displaced." (p. 83)

The critiques of revelation and religion were followed by the more encompassing critique of metaphysics as a whole in the work of Kant. It resulted in a consciousness which recognises the equivalence and undecidability of all metaphysical alternatives. Nevertheless, modern consciousness is "famished for the unattainable" and continues to postulate transcendent realms despite their having been unmasked as illusions.

## CYNICISM

Marx's critique, the fourth stage of enlightenment, goes beyond all previous efforts, in that it aims at an "integral critique of heads" as such. Guided by a realistic vision of the processes of labour in society, Marx analyses every form of consciousness as a function of the social process. Yet Marx also believed that one form of consciousness, that of the proletariat, would be exempt from the universality of reification and would be able to constitute itself as the emancipatory consciousness of an historical subject destined to liberate mankind. This theory shows the fundamental ambiguity, the "rupture epistemologique" in Marx between a theory of emancipation and a theory of universal mystification. In the former, the accent lies on the dialectics of liberation, in the latter the emphasis is on the processes of reification of consciousness, the "necessarily false consciousness" reflecting the processes of capital formation. According to Sloterdijk, the break in Marx between an early "humanistic" phase and a later "scientific" phase, is really a shift from a kynic impulse to a cynical technology of rule. This has resulted in the consequence that Marxism has become the functional lie of a system that uses the moment of truth in Marx as a means of ideological hardening. Its practitioners lie in saying the truth, thus continuing the rupture in Marx to the extent that socialism, once a language of hope, has become a means for stopping critical thinking.

Marx's theory of ideology prefigured this cynical rafinesse of present socialist systems. Indeed, it was a dialectical mixture between kynic and cynical elements, a theory of emancipation and power from its very beginning. It promised itself power by thinking the subject of theory as a function of social development. Thus it aimed at "controlling" history through an act of self-reification. By making itself into an instrument of the presumed future it believed to make the future into its own instrument. Marx was capable of this dialectical feat, because "his left half resembles Danton, his right reminds one of Bismarck. Like Hegel, who carried within himself a similar double nature of revolutionary and statesman, he is one of the greatest dialectical thinkers"... (pp. 187-88).

The fifth stage of the enlightenment, the critique of moral semblance, is associated prominently with the philosophy of Nietzsche, although its roots go back to the sayings of the great founders of religion. This critique goes from an unmasking of double standards in morality to an inversion of seeming and being and finally to the reduction of morality to a realistic primary motive. These three strategies in unmasking the hypocrisy of pretended morality and the reality of resentment behind the semblance of compassion, unfortunately end with Nietzsche's philosophy of the will of power. This "discovery" of a presumed primal motive behind all moral semblance has provided the impetus for one of the most striking inversions of the kynic impulse into a cynical philosophy of power. The concept of the power will has found its resonance among the Christian imperialists of the 19th and 20th centuries who saw in it a licence for their drive for power. It enabled them to unite political brutality and philosophical subtlety in one continuum.

The next two stages of enlightenment, the critique of transparency of the self

## HORST HUTTER

and the critique of naturalistic semblance have left their mark on modern culture both by providing emancipatory potential as well as potential for naively refined cynicisms. The former, the critique by Freud and others, has destroyed the illusion that every self knows itself best by introducing the concept of unconscious mental structures. The psychoanalytic method of deciphering consciousness has laid bare an enormous potential for liberation. But it has simultaneously led to a fixation of neurotic structures and to an inflation of infantilism. It has provided a refuge for emotional coldness that hides behind an analytical mask, as well as the possibility that the regression practiced in the service of the ego may remain regression enjoyed for its own sake. The latter, the critique of naturalistic semblance, associated chiefly with the work of Rousseau, has led to the unmasking of the fiction of an "evil" and brutal nature, a nature "red in tooth and claw" as merely a projection of a particular social order into the natural. But by tracing human ills to victimizations by class society it has itself provided enormous cynical potential. It has thus provided a haven for self-exculpation and indirect aggressivity that permits the type of the permanent victim to hide his aggression behind his victimization. Its worst cynical form is the condescension with which professional liberators of society regard its victims. By treating them as victims they not only deprive them of a remnant of dignity but also claim to rule them on the basis of their greater insight.

The last stage of enlightenment critique, the critique of private semblance, is especially important not only because it is a critique which presently has not yet done its work of undermining illusory structures, but also because it touches upon the very foundations of the structures of cynicism, namely the schizoid ego. It is a critique which questions the very existence of self or ego. The belief that the self is like a thing, distinct from the body, hides the most subtle and most pervasive form of reification. It is at the basis of all attempts of a consciousness that aims at power over things. It is the subject of the will to power as will to will. The disease that is called modern culture originates in an attempt by a "self" to set itself up as a thing over and apart from the processes of nature. While every concrete consciousness is a set of historically and socially pre-programmed schemata of perception, forms of judgment and logical thinking, and is as such comprehensive as a distinct entity, it is a reflexive illusion when these schemata come to think of themselves as having existence like an object in space-time. All attempts at affirming identity become reflexively hardened narcissisms, the most glaring examples of which are the "tank-egos" that maintain the present military-industrial complex. A removal of this illusion, hardened into a separate "self" by millenia of programmations, would result in the realisation that literally there is nobody there. Cynicism may be understood as an attempt to prevent the dissolution of this illusion which may be subjectively feared as the annihilation of "self". Sloterdijk believes that the way in which in the *Odyssee* Odysseus escapes the wrath of the cyclops is as superb statement about the problem of the self. These passages are so illuminating that they deserve to be quoted at some length:

## CYNICISM

The search for 'identity' seems one of the deepest unconscious programmizations, so deeply hidden that it escapes even the most attentive reflection. We all have programmed in us a formal *someone* as the carrier of our social identifications. *He* guarantees everywhere the precedence of the alien over the own; where ego seems to be, there always have already been others before me, in order to automatize me through my socializations. Our true self-experience is original *no-one-ness* which remains buried in this world beneath tabu and panic. At bottom no life has a name. The self-conscious *no-one* in us . . . is the living source of freedom. This living *no-one* is the one who remembers the energetic paradises underneath all personalities, despite the horrors of socialization. Its form of life is the intelligent body which we should call *yes body* and not *nobody*, and which may unfold itself from an areflexive narcissism toward a vision of itself as mirrored in the cosmic whole . . .

It is frequently necessary to become no-one, in order to survive. The *Odyssee* knows this at its most grandiose, wittiest scene. Odysseus, the present-minded Greek hero calls . . . to the blinded Cyclops that *no-one* had blinded him. Thus one may overcome both one-eyedness and blindness. With this call Odysseus . . . leaves the sphere of primitive moral causalities, the network of revenge . . . The utopia of every conscious life is and remains a world in which everybody may be Odysseus and may let live the *no-one* despite history, politics and citizenship, despite *someone-ness*. . . . therefore Odysseus and not Hamlet is the true ancestor of modern and everlasting intelligence.

It is easy to see how these ideas undercut the very bases of most structures of our lives. Hence we may see in the general panic of the dissolution of self caused by them one of the deepest sources of cynicism. The class structure itself would be only a secondary cause. The tank-egos into which the reflexive illusions have grown would not necessarily be dissolved with the attainment of a classless society. This knowledge about the illusory nature of the self, hitherto reserved for meditative minorities, finds its everlasting enemy in the structure of cynicism.

After thus discussing the nature of cynical defenses against the critical philosophy of the enlightenment, which consist in simultaneous affirmation and denial, Sloterdijk next analyses the great cynical types of world history as well as the cynicisms embedded in modern social structures. In the former, the cabinet of cynics, the author discusses the origins of cynicism in antiquity in the interpretation given of Diogenes and the Kynics by the Satirist Lucian of Samosata. Cynicism as kynic philosophy that has changed sides and has been

adopted by the power-holders properly begins with the writings of the ancient rhetorician Lucian. Lucian was followed in Western history by figures embodying both the kynic impulse and its cynic distortion. The author discusses three types, all of them literary, which have shaped and defined the modern cynical consciousness. There are Goethe's Mephisto as the kynic-cynical embodiment of the will to knowledge, Dostoijsky's grand-inquisitor, as the founder of modern institutional cynicism, and finally Heidegger's *One*, as the real subject of the diffuse cynicism of modernity.

It is odd that two figures from Western history which most readily suggest themselves for an analysis of cynicism are missing from this list. Thus, it might be argued that Augustine's doctrine of the political role of the church and his politicisation of Christian spirituality constitutes one of the most influential cynical inversions of the original kynic impulse radiating from Jesus. The grand inquisitor is believable as a figure precisely because of this antecedent origin of a cynical doctrine of institutions from a kynic critique. Similarly, one of the sublime masters of the cynical erection of schizoid structures would seem to be Machiavelli's Prince. This figure, more than most others, prefigures the cynicism of politics among nations. In general, the role of institutional Christianity in the genesis of cynicism, although discussed, does not receive the attention it seems to deserve.

Nevertheless, Sloterdijk's analysis of his three cynical types is excellent. Let us examine here only the last, Heidegger's *One*, as the one closest to our skins. The description of this subjectivity contains besides one of the most penetrating critiques of Heidegger's philosophy.

According to Sloterdijk, Heidegger analyses the impersonal subject, the *One* that initially governs us as the quintessence of inauthenticity. It is the *no-one* under whose rule I live as the other. Everyone is the other and no one is himself. For it everything seems authentic but is not, all discourse is mere talking in dispersion of mind. Human reality is controlled by imitators, by ego-machines that lead a ghost-like existence that is nevertheless no real existence. Everything appears as if. To separate appearance from reality would mean a re-introduction of the old style of metaphysical thinking based on the distinction between existence and essence. Heidegger does not wish to do this, yet he wants to maintain the possibility of a difference between inauthentic and authentic. The will authenticity bespeaks the metaphysical remnant in Heidegger's philosophy.

Heidegger leads us in a phantastically explicit manner through the realms of a positive negativity of the *One* and its dispersions, while simultaneously asserting that all of this is said without any utopian aims nor any moral critique. The alienation in which we live does not point back to another, unalienated condition from which we might have been thrown. The inauthenticity cannot be distinguished from authenticity yet points beyond itself. With this ambiguity Heidegger achieves a second liquidation of metaphysics after the first one achieved by the grand theories of the 19th century. He attempts a radical secularisation of aims and purposes. Existence is not a progress toward any kind



## CYNICISM

of grand purpose. One must think beyond good and evil not only in regard to means but also in regard to ends. We are in no way called upon to suffer today for a great tomorrow. Thus, Heidegger provides a powerful critique of the "socialisms of the grand tomorrow", of the "utopias of endless sacrifice".

Heidegger, while pointing to an authentic existence, nevertheless refuses to commit himself to any kind of moral distinction. This constitutes precisely his cynicism. But like every cynicism, this one also harbors a kynic core. Sloterdijk believes this kynic impulse to reside in Heidegger's concept of a resolute existence toward death. He quotes the following sentence from *Being and Time*: "The One prevents the arising of the courage to fear death". In this statement there is hidden a powerful critique of all those forms of existence that subsume one's own death as a means to the attainment of some great purpose. In the general culture based on armaments the meaningless of life is escaped by the many through an escape from the fear of death. But the "I die" accompanied by fear is to be understood as a kynic a-priori which can become the foundation for a resolute celebration of life, a giving of meaning by an energetic consciousness to the here and now. Needless to say Heidegger himself does not take this step but remains in a general cynical stance, the affirmation of an authentic other, a conscious existence without commitment to it. In Heidegger the critique of instrumental reason finds its completion as a critique of cynical reason. The cynicism of the means-ends calculators is destroyed by the kynic critique of all ends. There is here a great potential for liberation, once the Heideggerian melancholy is overcome. Authenticity can then be experienced in "love and sexual union, in irony and in laughter, creativity and responsibility, meditation and ecstasy". The difference between inauthentic and authentic existence would then be one between unconsciously automated guidance by a general cynical subject and conscious resoluteness toward that which is truly one's own, the consciously lived presence. Life can be lived in a continuum of conscious moments that lie beyond all moralities, especially those substitute moralities that place the good into the distant future and help to relativise evil on the way there.

Perhaps the most impressive section of Sloterdijk's long book is the one dealing with the six major institutional cynicisms by way of a phenomenological analysis, as well as the secondary cynicisms ensclosed in the information media, the markets and the systems of criminal justice.

The core of the analysis of institutional cynicisms is the recognition that in political reality as it is presently constituted the actual is not the rational. It departs from the fact that our institutions normally operate upon an idealistic interpretation that is counterposed to another, hidden interpretation which is suggested by the very functioning of these institutions. The officially proclaimed goals of institutions hide a more cynical recognition of the ugly "reality" behind the beautiful "appearance". Each of the major institutions hides a double truth: a truth of the masters and a truth of the victims, one of the hero and one of his valet. In this manner Sloterdijk describes the cynicisms institutionalised in the military, the organization of the state, the institutions

## HORST HUTTER

governing sexuality, medicine, religion and organized science. Some of these cynicisms may be briefly characterised.

Military policies have accustomed us to consider a gigantic *folie à deux* as the quintessence of conscious realism. Adaptation to the status quo means adaptation to a paranoid definition of reality. In this respect the terms "reality" and "realism" are systematically misused by official propagandists of the military apparatuses. These tend to characterise resistance to the madness of the armaments race as escape from reality into a world of beautiful dreams. In actual fact, we must escape from the systematic paranoia dominating everyday life into a realistic structure of detente.

In the state system cynicism arises from the tension between the two aspects of the modern state. It is on the one hand a system of legitimised oppression and violence. But on the other, it is the protector of the helpless, the maintainer of order and defender of peace. From the mixture of these two contradictory functions arises the cynical negation of all official interpretations of the state in theory and practice. Thus, the maintenance of peace is often merely the postponement of war, the establishment of order a euphemism for the bloody suppression of justified protest, concern for welfare merely a device to prevent revolution by the giving of alms, and the administration of justice a harmless term for the legalisation of refined repression. Servants of the state systematically engage in double think and double talk. Existence with this schizoid division in the mind has been in the West ever since Christianity became the official religion of imperial powers, and the religion of hope thus placed itself in the service of brutal powers in order to preserve its "kingdom of love". Thus, every symbol of this culture has become simultaneously a symbol of barbarism. The apogee of political cynicism was then reached with the coming of the national socialist state, which, according to Sloterdijk merits the epithet cynicism of cynicism. It was accompanied and followed by the development of a cynical structure of like dimensions, namely a state-capitalist society that labels itself socialist. The conflict today between two seemingly different systems of states is in reality a conflict within each system. In both the market capitalist states and the state capitalist systems the real conflict obtains between relations of production and forces of production. Both systems attempt to deflect attention from these conflicts within by projecting them outwards as conflicts between systems. Thus, a pretended capitalism is locked in deadly struggle with a pretended socialism, with both systems being in reality equally bankrupt. This real struggle over fictitious issues prevents both systems from realising the potentials inherent in them as actual tendencies towards free and rational societies.

The cynicism pervading sexual life is created by the dualisms introduced on the basis of Western ideologies of love. From the beginning in Platonism and Christianity theories of love have wittingly or unwittingly postulated dualities of body and spirit, "lower" and "higher" loves, genitals and the heart, sexuality and "love". These hierarchies have become institutionalised and have led to a creation of forbidden realms whose attractiveness grew as a function of the

## CYNICISM

measure of their suppression. The more the "lower" elements would be repressed, the more they returned to haunt the dreams of the "higher". Repressive idealisms have thus daemonized a whole spectrum of human experience. The very attempt had to lead to systematic lying in this sphere; hence the cynicism informing sexuality is an expression of this dishonesty. It is an attempt to accept the repressed but irrepressible reality in the guise of its denial. An example of this cynicism is modern pornography. While pornography has by and large lost all shock value, it is nevertheless still a booming business. It is, as it were, a "practicing of the acceptance of the not-yet structure of a schizoid consciousness which has been cheated out of its living time. It sells that which is immediately given as a matter of course as a distant goal, as a utopia of sexual attraction." (p. 488)

The stage for the appearance of medical cynicism is set by the dual function of the doctor as healer and partisan of life, and as a holder of power over life and death. With the former he is a natural ally of the oppressed, with the latter he is potentially in league with the oppressors. In modern life these two functions have separated into a popular medicine and a medicine of the masters whose emphasis is on maintaining the independent power status of the guild of practitioners. The entire practice of medicine has, moreover, developed into the technocratic administration of bodies in line with the general tendencies of the culture as a whole. The master medicine is the medicine of masters, insofar as it orients itself on its ability to cure the "bodies of power."

Additionally, in modern medical practice most diseases are the consequences of unreasonable modes of life fostered by society and even by medical practice itself. The very administration of medicine in such cases puts the doctor into the highly ambiguous position of acting against his better knowledge, of favoring with one hand the ills for which he receives his remuneration with the other. The partisanship of the doctor with life would oblige him to seek the prevention of illnesses by the elimination of their social and medical causes. This would imply the establishment of political and dietary intervention into those forms of life that render people ill. To the extent that medical practitioners merely content themselves with high technology and spectacular cures of illnesses, they are in the position of allowing the causes of diseases a free hand and cashing in on their results. There is thus a choice between a kynism of the simple life and a cynicism of comfortable dying, a kynism that confronts self-destruction, stupidity and ignorance with the certainty of death versus a cynicism that collaborates with the general repression of death in our overfed and overmilitarised societies.

Religious cynicism characterises organised Christianity in so far as it is based on dogmatisations of symbolic structures in regard to things on which in principle there cannot be certainty. Hence, dogmatic Christianity is from its beginning ridden by *mauvaise foi* and double think. Increasing dogmatisation has led to a self-deceptive and self-hypnotic state of consciousness in which one strongly affirms "absolute" faith in those areas in which one knows oneself to be highly uncertain. The heritage of *mauvaise foi* has remained after

## HORST HUTTER

secularisation within all post-Christian ideologies. Modern ideological distortions were prepared by the Christian habit of presenting the intrinsically uncertain in the guise of "conviction", the merely believed as the known, and one's confession as one's battle lie. Together with the systematic daemonization of the erotic sphere and its practice of confronting the fullness of life with the reminders of death, Christianity has left us with a bad consciousness that is spirally twisted in upon itself.

Finally, the cynicism pervading organized science derives from the gap between an increasingly abstract form of scientific knowledge, accessible to the very few, and the mixture of half wisdom and truth that constitutes popular wisdom. Modern science as the technological administration for the testing of abstract hypotheses is incapable of being the kind of knowledge that can be incorporated and lived. Moreover, the grand philosophies of order that provided the metaphysical foundations for the rise of modern science usually were confident of being the complete vision of the real. Kynic critiques have usually brought to bear facts and aspects of reality that do not fit the grand theories, against the pretensions of the latter to absolute knowledge. But the real cynicism of science according to Sloterdijk is constituted by the positivistic methods of empirical science. These methods are applied to aspects of reality in which such "scientific objectivity" is illegitimate, as in all the humanistic and social disciplines. In these subjects there should not be scientific neutrality but a concern for the "material" investigated. Scientific objectivity inevitably implies here a cynical complicity with those aspects of social reality which in the eyes of the subjects studied cry to heaven. The appropriate response to social facts that impose suffering upon men is not objectivity but passionate concern. The functionalist theoreticians find however, in positivist methodism an organon for the defense of existing systems against their victims, a defense with "mellow brutality and cool indirection."

The remainder of Sloterdijk's book contains interesting material on the secondary cynicisms referred to above, a transcendental analysis of schizoid subjectivity as well as a witty section on the psychosomatic manifestations of cynicism. By far the most interesting part is, however, the author's lengthy analysis of Weimar culture as a type case of, and a symbol for, the quintessence of cynicism. This goes back to an earlier book of the author dealing with an analysis of literature from the Weimar period.

Weimar culture was a highpoint of cynicism as enlightened false consciousness, as the simultaneous affirmation and denial of basic values. It was still close enough to the grandeur of the metaphysical tradition to attempt to maintain its high ideals, while irrevocably removed from it by the breakdown of the great culture in the World War. World War I, this "military commentary on Nietzsche's metaphysics" placed all post-war attempts at affirming the great tradition into the position of the hollow pose and grandiose but empty gesture. Thus, Weimar intellectuals developed attitudes of refined cynicism: "aesthetic autonomy in the midst of disintegration; participation in the general destruction; cold affirmations of conditions that denied the hopes of life;

## HORST HUTTER

attempts to overcome the coldness of the world through coldness of art." We, by contrast, live in a period of flat and bureaucratic cynicism in which even the illusory escape of the grand gesture is denied us. There is, however, one grand act that remains open to us by which we could effect a radical solution to all of our problems, that is, the general and bodily dissolution of the schizoid structure of consciousness in an atomic holocaust. In a witty chapter, entitled bomb meditation, the author characterises the atom bomb as the Buddha of the West. The very existence of the bomb may be that goad to complete and utter détente and relaxation on all fronts in which lie the only real solutions to the problems of our paranoia. The only question is whether this détente is to take the outer form of physical disintegration or the psychic form of the dissolution of the schizoid and defensive ego. Our hope lies, so Sloterdijk believes, in the recognition that the structure of our consciousness is based on a gigantic illusion.

In our best moments. . . our most energetic activism ends in letting things be . . . then when the rhythm of life spontaneously carries us, courage can return to us like an euphoric clarity of mind or a relaxed seriousness. In it wakefulness attains to the heights of being. Clearly and coolly every moment enters you. . then bad experiences are driven away by the new conditions. No history makes you old. The lovelessness of yesterday does not oblige you to anything. In the light of such presence of mind the spell of bad repetitions is broken. Every conscious moment cancels the hopeless past and becomes the first moment of a new history.

With these words, Sloterdijk ends his book which because of its structure reminds one more of a raga than a symphony. If that be a defect, it is surely a minor technical one, by its very length it is prevented from being the tightly argued treatise that we customarily expect from philosophers. This defect is counterbalanced by a wealth of vital and brilliant ideas that make one even forget the occasional exaggeration with which the author treats the "idealisms" of the great tradition. This tradition is not wholly dogmatic and not an entirely repressive structure of consciousness. Beginning with its foundations in the Platonic dialogues, it has always also been substantially nourished by the liberating light of critical reason. Kynism was not the only bright flash erupting into dogmatic darkness. Yet it is well to be reminded that beside the canonized Socrates of the philosophies of order there was another Socrates who got angry enough at injustice and stupidity to merit the epithet mad.

Department of Political Science  
Concordia University