
Ideological cynicism in the modern information age with Sloterdijk and Žižek

Liyan Gao
(Monash University)

Abstract: *Modernity has overseen rapid technological development, enabling unprecedented dissemination of information. This has led to enthusiasm for ‘consciousness raising’ activism as a means for creating political change. While new media opens up new potentialities, uncritical fetishisation of technology can be counter-productive. My research adopts Sloterdijk’s notion of cynicism as enlightened false consciousness to explore the negation of the emancipatory potential of knowledge, and to demonstrate how the enlightened consciousness does not necessarily act upon what it knows. This disconnection between knowing and acting is expounded by Žižek’s psychoanalytic interpretation of the enlightened false consciousness. I contend that to combat cynicism we need to go beyond information and turn towards the creative powers of the imagination. My research aims to provide a more critical relationship with new media, which does not fall to the traps of cynicism, and opens the space for transformative politics.*

Keywords: *Cynicism, false consciousness, ideology, information, imagination, action*

Basically, no one believes anymore that today's learning solves tomorrow's 'problems'; it is almost certain rather that it causes them.¹
-Sloterdijk

INTRODUCTION

In the age of digital media, we have unprecedented access to knowledge and the ability to create and disseminate our own ideas. Ideally, this would create a more democratic society, as political engagement requires access to information - no one speaks of an ignorant empowered citizen - yet the information age has met with disenchantment and apathy. As Zygmunt Bauman states in his introduction to *In Search of Politics*, there is a paradox in modern western democratic society: we proudly affirm ourselves as democratic and free, yet at the same time we do not believe we have the power to effect political change.² There are of course many contemporary examples of

¹ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 28.

² Zygmunt Bauman, *In Search of Politics* (Oxford: Polity, 1999), 1.

political activism, however, engaging in politics is still considered an activity conducted by officials or by radicals as the very term 'activist' presumes its exclusivity. Despite living in a democracy, the etymological meaning of which is 'the rule of the people', politics is not within the script of the ordinary citizen.³

Cynicism is prevalent in contemporary society, and I argue that this obstructs political action and negates the empowering potential of knowledge. The common meaning of cynicism is an attitude of distrust in others, and in disbelief of societal betterment, a notion associated in politics with apathy. However, this everyday notion eludes its more radical and potent ideological function as '*enlightened false consciousness*', first argued by Peter Sloterdijk in his work *Critique of Cynical Reason*.⁴ The enlightened false consciousness appears immediately as an oxymoron - how can one be simultaneously informed and deceived? For Sloterdijk, the enlightened false consciousness denotes how the potency of information is annulled by 'reflexive buffering' critique: hence one is both informed yet not affected by the newly received information.

Cynicism is enlightened false consciousness. It is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has laboured both successfully and unsuccessfully. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not and probably been not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buffered.⁵

This concept illustrates the limitations of information circulation, revealing how potentially empowering knowledge can be directed into fuelling a cynical attitude of apathy. Sloterdijk's analysis will provide a critical theoretical lens to better understand this paradox: in self-proclaimed democracies, despite the advent of new media and increased access to knowledge, political inaction and apathy increases. In the current post-Cold war political climate, Chantal Mouffe believes that the 'end of history' narrative has come to fruition at least in one significant sense.⁶ The current western model of liberal-democratic-capitalist governance has dominated the political imagination to the point that alternatives to the status quo are unimaginable, and so cynicism sustains the status quo, positioning all alternative possibilities as unrealistic. My research will utilise Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalytic interpretation of Sloterdijk to examine the psychological aspects of cynicism and its collective effects.⁷ In particular, I will explore how the affective efficacy of knowledge has been perverted as it is used to justify our inaction and the inevitability of the status quo. As Žižek states, "To be

³ There are certain examples that do push this boundary of the exclusivity of the activist; the *Occupy* movement was a failed attempt, and more recently the *Black Lives Matter* movement garners broad support from the African American community.

⁴ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, xii.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, Thinking in Action (London ; New York: Routledge, 2005), 1-3, 32.

⁷ Žižek is one of the key contemporary theorists to incorporate Sloterdijk's critique of cynical into his political theory.

intelligent and still perform one's work, that is unhappy consciousness in its modernised form, afflicted with enlightenment."⁸ Finally, I will discuss the power of imagination as a possible force to breach this cycle of cynicism to renew a more optimistic and engaged political climate.

CYNICISM AS ENLIGHTENED FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

Sloterdijk's notion of cynicism as enlightened false consciousness invokes Marx's original concept of false consciousness. For Marx, ignorance of the proletariat sustains the very conditions that oppress, either by failure to recognise their condition or by a false conviction that emancipation can be achieved through the system as it is, possibly through slow legislative reform.⁹ Marx and the Critical Theory tradition more broadly believed critique would awaken the class-consciousness of the masses as the moment the proletariat understood the truth of their condition as an oppressed class they would revolt against these conditions. Marx postulated that relationship between knowledge and action was one of cause and effect.¹⁰ The enlightened false consciousness, on the other hand, is aware of the conditions that oppress it, yet fails to act against these conditions. Cynicism brings a begrudging acceptance of the way things are and an abandonment of any hope for change which undermines the transformative potential of knowledge. Sloterdijk differentiates modern cynicism with the *kynic* of the Ancient Greeks. The *kynics* were outsiders who mocked the morality of society through public displays of satirical cheekiness and animalistic gestures. The *kynic* is described "as a lone owl and as a provocative, stubborn moralist".¹¹ In contrast, the modern cynics are not interested in public defiance: they are an anonymous mass, integrated into society, and for whom self-preservation is a cornerstone of their ethos.¹²

As Sloterdijk argues, cynicism is an ideology both in the descriptive sense, as it provides a framework for meaning and the pejorative sense in that it is self-deceptive. The cynical consciousness, according to Sloterdijk, was inherent in the Weimar Republic. After Germany was defeated in World War One, and was subsequently bound by the humiliating Treaty of Versailles, the nation fell into a cynical state of disappointment.¹³ The adoption of a cynical consciousness became a defence from future disappointment. By presuming the worst, cynics believe they are one step ahead, and so the cynical consciousness never feels fooled or deceived and takes pride at having suspicions validated. Cynics develop a false sense of superiority and security. The irony is, however, in the attempt to avoid being naively unaware of their societies' insidious underbelly; they have in the process inadvertently accepted these problematic aspects,

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Phronesis (London ; New York: Verso, 1989), 7.

⁹ Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory : Habermas and the Frankfurt School*, Modern European Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1-3, 58-62.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15-17; Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 5-7.

¹¹ *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 101-03. Sometimes behaviour included obscene, shocking gestures such as such as public urination and masturbation.

¹² *Ibid.*, 3-7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 384-414.

falling into a deeper layer of naiveté. As Sloterdijk states, “this critique has remained more naive than the consciousness it wanted to expose”.¹⁴

Cynicism is a self-fulfilling prophecy, where its own failures to intervene reproduces the conditions of cynicism. The *Rio +20 Earth Summit*, held in 2012 in Rio de Janeiro, is an example of cynicism as a self-fulfilling prophecy.¹⁵ The summit failed to obtain substantial commitment from delegates, and it was argued that the disappointing outcome was predetermined by the cynical attitude of the participants. Delegates went to the summit with low expectations and low demands, assuming that the large corporations would have their way, dominate the discourse and so determine the global response to climate change. Hence, when corporations dominated the discourse, this was treated as ‘just how things are’ or ‘how the world works’. By assuming the worst, by lacking any hope for betterment, any alternative possibilities are forestalled:

Much of the reporting of Rio reflected the profound cynicism that was the only emotion on offer. We read articles on the hotel rooms, on traffic jams, on the security. What was lost was any sense of what was truly at stake – our future on the only planet we have. Many media outlets largely ignored Rio; in others, the most important environmental conference in 20 years was reduced to a lifestyle feature¹⁶.

The release in 1860 of Multatuli’s satirical novel *Max Havelaar: Or the Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company* revealed to poor working conditions in the Dutch East Indies during the nineteenth century, and sparked public uproar in the Netherlands, triggering successful public protests against the exploitation of the workers. It ultimately helped shape Dutch colonial policy.¹⁷ While the Dutch public were genuinely ignorant of the poor labour conditions in the Dutch East Indies, current journalistic exposes on the injustices of the world merely confirm our widespread understanding of how the world operates, and it would be more surprising to hear that corporations were acting ethically in accordance to government regulations.¹⁸ Wikileaks illustrates that the publicising of government and corporate corruption does not in itself incite political action as it merely confirms what we already suspect governments secretly do. By embracing a strategic cynical attitude of suspicion, where the worst outcome is expected, one becomes immune and desensitised to information

¹⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹⁵ *Rio +20 Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development)* was held twenty years after the *United Nations Conference on Environment and Development*, which was convened in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

¹⁶ F. Harvey, *Rio +20 makes no fresh, green breast of the new world*. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/blog/2012/jun/25/rio-20-great-gatsby>, 2000.

¹⁷ Multatuli was the pen-name of Dutch author Eduard Doves Dekker; Pramoedya Ananta Toer, "Best Story; the Book That Killed Colonialism," *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/18/magazine/best-story-the-book-that-killed-colonialism.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹⁸ Dutch East Indies is now known as Indonesia. The book *Max Havelaar* motivated the Dutch Ethical policy, which led to the end of Dutch Colonialism, and some argue this inspired the de-colonisation movement in Africa.

that reveals dubious and unethical practices. The cynical attitude fails to address and change the conditions that initially raised the concerns. The false sense of security that cynicism provides comes at the cost of an impetus for change. Instead of being a vehicle for change, the gaining of information and knowledge is relegated to an end in itself.¹⁹

SELF-DECEPTION AT THE LEVEL OF ACTION

For Sloterdijk, the key issue with modern subjectivity is not the lack of knowledge, but rather that the power of knowledge is nullified by cynicism. When one always expects the worst, one is not surprised by the revelation of oppressive conditions: at an unconscious level there is already an acknowledgement of such conditions, and it is the underlying assumption of their worldview. The cynic might proclaim its illegitimacy but nevertheless continues to live within it, and a society that is not plagued with the same problems cannot be imagined. Hence, cynicism prescribes a self-deceptive psychological defence against what are social and political problems. Though we are not fooled in the same way as the subject of Marx's false consciousness, the effect is the same, and it stifles the ability to act against an oppressive system.

The traditional *Kynikoi* of Ancient Greece, in contrast to modern cynics, were outsiders to society who aimed to subvert society through satirical activity. The modern cynic is no longer the outsider who rejects official norms through action. They continue to sustain and reproduce society's oppressive functions, falsely believing they have no other options. They reject the norms but remain integrated in the system by default. According to Žižek, ideology is no longer the Marxist "*they do not know it, but they are doing it...*", instead it is that "*...they know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it*".²⁰

For Žižek, Marx's concept of commodity fetishism demonstrates the layers of complexity that arise with cynicism. For example, he argues people are not completely ignorant, they know that money has value only because of the embedded socio-economic relations, but their actions betray their true unconscious beliefs. These unconscious beliefs can be understood by Žižek's concept of the 'objectively subjective truth', or what a subject really believes.²¹ As we live life by treating money as if it holds supernatural qualities, these actions reveal our objectively subjective true beliefs.²²

Žižek argues that "the very process of production functions as the fetish which conceals the crucial dimension of the form".²³ Consider the increasingly popular behind-the-scenes productions on reality television: these expose the fashion industry's methods, including the use of photo-shop, make-up, lighting, judicious editing, and special effects, to manufacture an idealised image. The exposure of the mechanism behind the fantasy does not undermine the ideological effect as these images still inform

¹⁹ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, xii.

²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, "The Spectre of Ideology," in *Mapping Ideology* (London ; New York: Verso, 1994), 8.

²¹ Ibid., Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, Essential Žižek (London: Verso, 2008).

²² Ibid., 148.

²³ Ibid., 130.

beauty standards.²⁴ Cynicism permits us to intellectually reject the fantasies presented to us while still 'believing' them, or, as Žižek puts it, the ideology functions at the level of the doing.²⁵ This attitude is succinctly expressed as "je sais bien, mais quand-même": I know very well, but nevertheless.²⁶

Cynical ideology functions at the level of action rather than knowledge, and the power of ideology lies in people's active participation in sustaining and reproducing its own conditions. One can be against the exploitations of workers and believe these conditions are socially abhorrent and yet still sustain and reproduce the environments that allow these conditions to continue.²⁷ If ideology operates independently from belief, all efforts to educate and inform will pose no challenge. Wikileaks has been lauded for revealing the *truth* by leaking official government documents, although these accolades have focused on the role Wikileaks has played in raising awareness about government activities rather than the political change it can incite (or has failed to incite). Information is essential to political action as we cannot act without any orientation or direction, but it is not sufficient. Geuss states that the "Although reflection alone can't do away with real social oppression...Delegitimation of oppression maybe a necessary precondition of political action, which would bring real liberation".²⁸ In our information obsessed society we are in danger of fetishising the power of information, treating its instrumental value as an end in itself. There is something about the way new media has reconstructed our relationship with knowledge that has sustained cynical ideology at an unconscious level. When the conscious-raising tactics of new media fail to create the change it espouses, the disappointed cynics generalise the failures. The problem of course lies not in politics but rather a question of tactics and approaches in engaging in politics effectively.

OVER-INFORMATION

In our information-obsessed society, people are bombarded with more information than they can process and comprehend. Paul Virilio identifies two aspects to the way the public consumes information that are peculiar to new media. First, the sheer speed at which we receive information diminishes the time for digestion, contemplation and reflection. Secondly, the immense diffusion of viewpoints creates a kind of mass aporia that debilitates our ability to act in any particular direction. Virilio argues just as the military may deliberately plant multiple viewpoints within the public sphere to crush potential dissent, the public can become overwhelmed with information and push the

²⁴ In fact, sometimes the 'making of an advertisement' pseudo-documentary clips are marketed prior to the launch of an advertising campaign to generate more brand awareness.

²⁵ Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, 124.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁷ Žižek argues parents dress up as Santa Claus because they do not want to rob their children of this fantasy. However, the children do not believe in Santa Claus either, but they nevertheless play along. Here, no one believes in Santa Claus, yet the function and effect of believing in Santa Claus remains, along with the accompanying rituals, such as receiving presents.

²⁸ Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School*, 75.

issue aside as something too complex to understand: they are unable or unwilling to form an oppositional stance. The function of new media is the same.²⁹ Given the multitude of problems facing modern society, we need to prioritise how to spend our limited energies and resources as when the task looks too enormous and too difficult there are overwhelming feelings of disempowerment.

Žižek compares the reporting of the Gulf War with that of the Bosnian War. In the former, the employment of 'evil versus good' framing was used to demonise Saddam Hussein and to justify the war. In the latter, journalists focused on the complexities of the issue including the long history of conflict in the region.³⁰ Though this approach informs people of more facts, it clouds the brute reality that ethnic cleansing and genocide was rife during the war. By painting the Bosnian War as too complex for both citizens and politicians of the West to understand, people were absolved from the responsibility of intervening in the crisis. Cynicism is this aporia raised to the level of a psychological barrier: new media can present world problems as too complicated, too extensive, too global, beyond the control and understanding of any one individual, and thus, as problems we cannot hope to intervene in or politically organise to oppose. Merely being more knowledgeable about the complexity of the problems in our society does not dispel ideology nor is it necessarily empowering. When we feel overwhelmed and disempowered to change the current situation and condition, we learn to adapt and accept them. Subsequently, numbness and apathy comes from paradoxically caring.

THE SEDUCTION OF CYNICISM

The feeling of being overwhelmed and disempowered makes people susceptible to embracing what Jodi Dean calls the victimhood position. This position addresses the sense of being overwhelmed by providing a means of understanding oneself within the chaos of over-information, and the feeling of disempowerment by instilling a moral high ground, albeit a false one. When one is overwhelmed by the various unethical practises of the world one feels unable, or incapable, to intervene in a meaningful way. The victimhood position assumes an identity of hopelessness, which validates our feelings of powerlessness. Hence instead of taking the more difficult but ultimately rewarding path of politics, the cynic embraces their hopelessness.³¹

In the 2000 U.S. Presidential election the Democrat candidate Al Gore controversially lost to Republican George Bush, despite winning the popular vote. For Dean, the victimhood position is evident in the Democrat's failure to contest the results. While prominent leftist commentators argued the Republicans 'stole' the election, thus presenting themselves as victims, Dean argues the Democrats gave up and forfeited the election cynically because they were convinced of America's conservatism and their own powerlessness:

²⁹ Virilio, Paul Virilio, *Strategy of Deception* (London ; New York: VERSO, 2000), 47-48.

³⁰ Žižek, "The Spectre of Ideology," 4-5.

³¹ Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies : Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 4-6.

[The Left was] convinced that the country was republican, conservative, capitalist, Christian fundamentalist, and evangelical. It's almost as if we believed in their strength and unity, their power and influence, more than they did themselves. So we submitted to what we loudly lamented as our own worst nightmare.³²

When the Left argued Bush won the election because America was becoming increasingly more conservative, they absolved themselves of the responsibility for their own inaction while maintaining their moral superiority. This event shows the temptation of the victimhood position for the modern cynic: they cannot be accused of being naïve, nor can they be reproached for any political failures.³³

Dean points towards the Black Power movement, the Sisterhood movement, and the Queer movement as examples of political struggles that have refuted the victimhood position.³⁴ These movements are premised on agency, strength, and self-determination.³⁵ Though there are of course marginalised sectors of society who are victims of oppression, however, recognising and acknowledging this is different from assuming victimhood as a mode of being or an emblem of one's identity. A sense of empowerment is necessary for people to overcome their oppressive conditions, something they cannot achieve if they mobilise around victimhood as something essential to their experiences.

Dean's notion of victimhood is indebted to Nietzsche's concept of resentment. The link between Sloterdijk's notion of cynicism and resentment is analysed by Robert Halsall through Sloterdijk's *Contempt for the Masses: Essay on the Culture Wars in Modern Society*. Halsall distinguishes resentment from resentment by arguing that while resentment can motivate political action through revenge, resentment is a generalised feeling that seeks symbolic revenge rather than political outcomes:

First, whereas resentment is specific in targeting its blame, the feeling of resentment is generalized: it seeks to identify someone or something, a target, however imprecise, responsible for the feelings of contempt which the mass subject feels. Second, whereas resentment can be channelled into overturning the political circumstances responsible for the state of affairs, resentment finds no specific political or other outlet, and is thus converted into a general feeling of contempt for all 'higher' things, a desire for symbolic revenge.³⁶

Rage and Time is a later work of Sloterdijk where he discusses Nietzsche's concept of resentment in relation to rage. As Nietzsche situates the origin of resentment in Christian (slave) morality, Sloterdijk considers resentment as the deference of rage,

³² Ibid., 5.

³³ Ibid. Dean's notion of victimhood is rooted in Nietzschean concept of resentment

³⁴ For example, some feminists use the term 'survivor' to describe what legally is defined as a sexual assault victim.

³⁵ Alberto Altés Arlandis, "Sharing, Displacing, Caring: Towards an Ecology of Contribution," in *Intravention, Durations, Effects: Notes of Expansive Sites and Relational Architectures*, ed. Oren Lieberman Alberto Altés Arlandis (Germany: Umeå School of Architecture, 2013), 279.

³⁶ Robert Halsall, "Sloterdijk's Theory of Cynicism, Resentment and 'Horizontal Communication'," *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 1, no. 2 (2005): 147.

where the afterlife will rectify any injustices. This typifies modernity's approach to overcoming and suppressing rage, which Sloterdijk contrasts with the Ancient Greek *thymotic* (of pride and spirit) approach of harnessing rage.³⁷ While Sloterdijk departed from his critical theory heritage when criticising communism as a form of resentment (which brought him criticism from old supporters including Žižek), nonetheless one can draw the connection between cynicism's ability to suppress rage instead of utilising it towards political action. Sara Ahmed similarly argues that the fetishisation of the wound is a form of Nietzsche's resentment. Transforming the wound into an identity involves substituting politics (an action) for revenge (a reaction):³⁸

I agree with the transformation of the wound into an identity is problematic. One of the reasons that it is problematic is precisely because of its fetishism: the transformation of the wound into an identity cuts the wound off from a history of 'getting hurt' or injured. It turns the wound into something that simply 'is' rather than has happened in time and space. The fetishisation of the wound as a sign of identity is crucial to 'testimonial culture', in which narratives of pain and injury have proliferated.³⁹

When one is bombarded and overwhelmed with the different problems of the world, victimhood is a comforting and affirming position. However as Ahmed puts it, the position ultimately increases the pain and injury it aims to address, and it enables us to "deal with it" without affecting any real change. Sharon Stanley places cynicism as the successor of the enlightenment: it has taken the lessons of challenging traditions and religions to their logical conclusions but without rebuilding a better alternative world.⁴⁰ Kant wrote in *What is the Enlightenment?* that enlightenment involved not only possessing knowledge but also acting upon the knowledge: he concluded "The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere Aude! [Dare to be wise!] Have courage to use your understanding!"⁴¹ My research argues that cynicism is precisely the immature, self-deceptive attitude of the coward, scared by past failures. The path to escaping the self-depiction of cynicism is to move away from informational, sound-bite new media and promote the expansion of discursive and visionary forms of knowledge.

THE NARROWING OF IMAGINATION AND THE CONTRACTION OF VISION

I argue that political *vision* is essential for any politics, as the imaginative aspect of vision enables us bring forth new modes of organising that challenge the current conditions of society. Sheldon Wolin argues all political theory and thought is

³⁷ Peter Sloterdijk and Mario Wenning, *Rage and Time : A Psychopolitical Investigation*, Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 25-28.

³⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 32.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Stanley Sharon, "Retreat from Politics: The Cynic in Modern Times," *Polity* 39, no. 3 (2007): 401-02.

⁴¹ Immanuel Kant, Hugh Barr Nisbet, and Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question 'What Is Enlightenment?'*, Reprint ed., Great Ideas (London: Penguin, 2009), 1.

imaginative because imagination plays an essential role in creating coherence out of a chaotic world⁴². Even theorists of rationality and liberal procedural democracy such as John Rawls employ imaginative devices such as the 'veil of ignorance'. Dismissing the imagination as the domain of mere fiction and illusion overlooks the role it plays in structuring how we understand and make sense of reality. Cornelius Castoriadis' project is set against the under-appreciation of imagination within philosophical thought and politics.⁴³ Castoriadis outlines two definitions of imagination developed from Aristotle's work: a primary and a secondary form. The secondary form is the common understanding of imagination, one that imitates, reproduces, or combines pre-existing representations and forms, while the primary form of imagination (or what Castoriadis describes as *radical imagination*) brings out something new - it has the quality of natality. Radical imagination's transformative powers lie in its ability to redefine the very parameters of politics.⁴⁴

With the 'End of History' and the end of the communist experiment, there has been a vacuum of alternative grand political narratives to challenge current political hegemonies. Frederic Jameson famously proclaimed that "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism". It is this dearth of imaginative possibilities that underlies the familiar, cynical expression 'there is no alternative'.⁴⁵ We need to go beyond this mindlessness: we have become so desensitised to the perils of the world that the image of a starving child has become a cliché. Instead, we need to re-imagine new structure and modes of organisation, one where the starving child no longer exists. Of course, this is not an easy task, and it can be met with the same cynical attitude. Theorists such as Fisher and Žižek have proposed that to challenge the current liberal political hegemony with an alternative vision is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks of contemporary politics. While any attempt to re-imagine new alternatives may be met with obstacles and even failures, there is the potential for political transformation by going beyond facts and information to instil faith and courage.⁴⁶ Foucault uses Kant's analysis of the French Revolution to argue that the significance of the Revolution lay in its spectacular quality: the revolution on the streets instilled the conviction that the values it aspired to were possible.⁴⁷ The success of the Revolution was in the fervour and enthusiasm it aroused, and which triumphed over cynicism.

In his book *Cynicism and Postmodernity*, Timothy Bewes aims to discern the relationship between these two concepts, and he adopts Sloterdijk's distinction between ancient and modern cynics, describing the latter as a typical postmodern

⁴² Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision; Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Boston,: Little, 1960), 18-20.

⁴³ Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, Blackwell Readers (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 319-20.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 321.

⁴⁵ Frederic Jameson, "Future City," *New Left Review* May-June, no. 21 (2003).

⁴⁶ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism : Is There No Alternative?* (Ropley, England ; Washington, DC: O Books, 2009), 10-13; Žižek, "The Spectre of Ideology," 1-2.

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault and Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others : Lectures at the Collège De France, 1982-1983* (Basingstoke New York: Palgrave Macmillan ; St Martin's Press, 2010), 18.

characteristic.⁴⁸ For Bewes, former U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair's 'third way' politics typifies postmodern cynicism, where Blair justifies the Labour party need's to adapt to the political "realities" and go beyond the traditional political division of left and right. What Blair fails to recognise is that transforming the current realities (generally for better) is precisely the *raison d'être* of politics. While for the most part Bewes' work is levelled against postmodernism as an ally of depoliticisation, he also recognises it is a diverse concept, and in fact Bewes speaks of nostalgia for the critical version of postmodernism.⁴⁹ This critical postmodernism is best described in the appendix of Lyotard's work *Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?* Here Lyotard defines postmodernism as that which presents the unrepresentable, and which brings out the invisible to re-envision our reality. Bewes argues that politics needs to inhabit the space between political integrity and reality, to be both critically distance and politically engaged.⁵⁰ In this vein, Bewes accuses Sloterdijk of a variant of postmodernism for his prescription of overcoming the failures of the enlightenment by recovering the Diogenes' cheekiness in the tradition of the Kynics.⁵¹ Bewes argues that Sloterdijk abandons the critical enlightenment project of improving society and hence falls into the cynical trap he aims to overcome. While there is space for cheekiness and satire in politics, this needs to be accompanied by the critical postmodernism which challenges the current realities by bringing out the invisible, the unrepresentable and opening space for transformation.

Art is another space for collective imagination and in *Aesthetic and World Politics* Roland Bleiker analyses the political potential of poetry.⁵² He discusses the work of Korean poet and activist Ko Un who was involved in the democratic movement in South Korea. His poetry gave voice to marginalised voices criticising the military dictatorships of South Korea.⁵³ Ko Un was a true believer in poetry's ability to create social and political change, and he read his poetry to a diverse audience from factory workers to university students. Bleiker argues Ko Un approach to poetry made him a vital part of cultural and literary movement in Korean that led to the revolution which in turn led to the first popular election in Korea. The successful influence Ko Un's poetry lies in its ability to counter the Japanese colonial heritage by offering a new collective consciousness that aimed to triumph over the pre-existing establishment, and create a new better future for Korea.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (London ; New York: Verso, 1997), 2.

⁴⁹ Bewes argues that the metaphysical uncertainty of postmodernism has been inappropriately applied to politics. While it makes sense to question the attainability of metaphysical absolutes, politics is not concerned with obtaining certainty but rather striving towards an unattainable horizon. While deconstructing socially constructed binaries is useful on a metaphysical level and can have critical and progressive political potential, this generalised approach of insecurity applied to politics disables any action. *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵² Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetic and World Politics (Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies)*, ed. Oliver Richmond, *Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies* (New York Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 84-140.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵⁴ Ko Un poems were concerns with the search of Korean identity during the post-colonial rule by Japan, as the Japanese attempted to erase Korean culture and language.

LOOKING FORWARD

The form of new media reinforces cynical ideology with the popular new media platforms which promote sound-bite information. In an increasingly commodified and consumer-driven society, information is designed for speedy consumption, packaged in neat palatable visuals and digestible format.⁵⁵ This form of knowledge is the antithesis of meaningful knowledge which contextualises information. It tells us facts, but not how to enact upon the new found knowledge. The messages of political opposition circulating within the digital media platform from blogs posts and twitter updates are just another contribution, another opinion, as meaningful and politically powerful as our daily garbage.⁵⁶ There are of course examples where technology has played a positive role in activism. Most notably the Arab Spring drew a lot of attention for the use of social media, with some pundits dubbing it the 'Twitter revolution'. While social media facilitated the dissemination of information, the over exaggeration of its significance has been at the expense of undermining the importance of on-ground community organising. For the Arab protestors, the Internet supplemented but never substituted political action: they recognised the importance of physical presence as a mode of dissent.⁵⁷ It was these protestors, not the online tweets, who toppled Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Similar arguments can be made in regards to the Occupy movement or the Black Lives Matter movement. My essay is not advocating abandoning engagement with new media, but rather adopting a more critical response against the current fervour of technological fetishism. This involves firstly understanding that technology cannot substitute spatial mobilisation of masses, community building or campaigns that work towards long-term goals. We need to resist replicating the advertising techniques of sensationalist sound-bite modes of communicating that new media favours and aim for meaningful engagement.

Sharon Stanley argues against the views of Sloterdijk and Žižek that all forms of cynicism are apathetic and needs eradication. Instead, she proposes to develop a politics that is appropriate to the cynical age and integrates its insights. For Stanley, no one is fully cynical, there are only partial cynics. She gives the example of someone who mocks reality television but who are still politically hopeful.⁵⁸ In fact, Stanley argues a dosage of cynicism can help inform our politics by giving us better ideas of the obstacles and act as "provocative gadflies".⁵⁹ While it is true that there are different degrees of cynicism which vary depending on the object it is directed towards, the Sloterdijk notion of cynicism as false consciousness is more than mere apprehension, criticism, or understanding of obstacles and difficulties of politics: rather, it is the generalised feeling

⁵⁵ Paul A. Taylor and Jan LI Harris, *Critical Theories of Mass Media : Then and Now* (Maidenhead: McGraw Hill/Open University Press, 2008).

⁵⁶ Jodi Dean, *Blog Capture : Feedback and Capture Inthe Circuits of Drive* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010), 95-97.

⁵⁷ Dhiraj Murthy, *Twitter : Social Communication in the Twitter Age*, Digital Media and Society (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012), 95. R Srinivasan, "Taking Power through Technology in the Arab Spring," (2012).

⁵⁸ Sharon, "Retreat from Politics: The Cynic in Modern Times," 401.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 405.

of despair and distrust in the world and its future. As Bewes claims, cynicism is the “*formalisation of an endemic disappointment*”.⁶⁰

David Mazella’s work, *The Making of Modern Cynicism*, is similarly wary of denunciations of cynicism, in particular a moralistic response to cynicism that dismisses legitimate feelings of alienation.⁶¹ He cites Senator William Benton of Connecticut calling public cynicism “the gravest problem of America” as an example where the politicians are not interesting in understanding and addressing cynicism but instead shut down public dissent of political institutions.⁶² This results in maintaining the very institutions and power structures that have created the disenchantment of the cynics.⁶³ Mazella argues that critics of cynics are too quick to dismiss cynicism out of impatience to action, a fault of both the left and right: “Many of the attacks on cynicism, whether from the political right or left, are based on an untenable distinction between political action and political language”.⁶⁴ However, what Mazella fails to recognise, which Žižek points out poignantly, is that cynicism is precisely the divorce of action and thought. Political action does involve taking stances. Constant deference leads to inaction although this does not forestall revision or continuous dialogue and conversation concerning politics. Action and thinking should be viewed as two threads forming one strong rope that help elevates our society.

CONCLUSION

New media diverts political dissatisfaction and energy into ineffective forms of activism, and when it inevitably becomes apparent to the activists themselves that it is ineffective – because nothing has changed – disappointment and feelings of disempowerment create the ripe conditions for cynicism. My thesis has analysed some of the political limitations of information and consciousness-raising, in particular focussing on Sloterdijk’s notion of cynicism and how it divorces action from knowledge. My research takes the crucial step in problematising the conscious-raising activism to provide a space to pause and reflect on whether the desired ends, in this case political change, are met. Using psychoanalysis, my research illustrates how cynicism can provide satisfaction for people even when they are in a situation contrary to their explicit beliefs. Hence in our informational world, the oversaturation of knowledge leads to paradoxical effect of not emancipating people but overwhelming the subject and paralysing them from action. Information can lead to a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness detrimental to political action, contrary to the intentions of the

⁶⁰ Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity*, 6.

⁶¹ David Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 11. Mazella aims to trace the transformation of the ancient cynic to the modern cynic with purpose of better understanding the contemporary cynic, tracing the emergences of the modern cynic to the time period of late 18th century and early 19th century, coinciding with disappointing failure of the Enlightenment project.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

enlightenment project. The position of the victim is dressed up through resentment to a position of moral superiority, and this sense of (false) strength derived from victimhood quells the emancipatory potential of fighting against the oppressive structural conditions imposed. Hence, the victimhood position of the cynic becomes reified, a subjectivity void of responsibility and commitment to structural conditions of the world. To avoid creating an ironically cynical view of cynicism; my thesis argues we can overcome the cycle of cynical ideology through the expansion of our collective imagination. I argue that by posing an alternative vision of the world, one can foremost overcome the sense of hopelessness, the status quo becomes contingent and no longer inevitable: rather, a better world is possible. Further, vision situates information into a broader context; placing people within a narrative from which they can draw meaning and hence direct them towards action. The aim of this research is to elucidate some core errors plaguing modern society, with the intention of provoking more thought on the how to avoid the cynical ideology of false enlightened consciousness. There is no fool-proof blueprint for effective political action, but if we want to transform the structure of society, to create a more fulfilling society, one that satisfies our desires and interest, we need to participate in real political action. One cannot retreat from the public realm of action out of fear of failure.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004.
- Arlandis, Alberto Altés. "Sharing, Displacing, Caring: Towards an Ecology of Contribution." In *Intravention, Durations, Effects: Notes of Expansive Sites and Relational Architectures*, edited by Oren Lieberman Alberto Altés Arlandis, 273-83. Germany: Umeå School of Architecture, 2013.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *In Search of Politics*. Oxford: Polity, 1999.
- Bewes, Timothy. *Cynicism and Postmodernity*. London ; New York: Verso, 1997.
- Bleiker, Roland. *Aesthetic and World Politics (Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies)*. Rethinking Peace and Conflict Studies. edited by Oliver Richmond New York Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Castoriadis, Cornelius. *The Castoriadis Reader*. Blackwell Readers. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.
- Dean, Jodi. *Blog Capture : Feedback and Capture Inthe Circuits of Drive*. Cambridge: Polity, 2010.
- . *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies : Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. doi:(Ybp)3072864.
- Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism : Is There No Alternative?* Ropley, England ; Washington, DC: O Books, 2009.
- Foucault, Michel, and Michel Foucault. *The Government of Self and Others : Lectures at the College De France, 1982-1983* [in Translated from the French.]. Basingstoke New York: Palgrave Macmillan ; St Martin's Press, 2010.
- Geuss, Raymond. *The Idea of a Critical Theory : Habermas and the Frankfurt School*. Modern European Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Halsall, Robert. "Sloterdijk's Theory of Cynicism, Resentment and 'Horizontal Communication'." *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 1, no. 2 (2005): 163-79.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Future City." *New Left Review* May-June, no. 21 (2003).
- Kant, Immanuel, Hugh Barr Nisbet, and Immanuel Kant. *An Answer to the Question 'What Is Enlightenment'?* [in Translated from the German.]. Great Ideas. Reprint ed. London: Penguin, 2009.
- Mazella, David. *The Making of Modern Cynicism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007.
- Mouffe, Chantal. *On the Political*. Thinking in Action. London ; New York: Routledge, 2005.

- Murthy, Dhiraj. *Twitter : Social Communication in the Twitter Age*. Digital Media and Society. Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012. doi:(Ybp)7631231.
- Sharon, Stanley. "Retreat from Politics: The Cynic in Modern Times." *Polity* 39, no. 3 (2007): 384-407.
- Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Theory and History of Literature. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Sloterdijk, Peter, and Mario Wenning. *Rage and Time : A Psychopolitical Investigation* [in Translated from the German.]. *Insurrections: Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- Srinivasan, R. "Taking Power through Technology in the Arab Spring." 2012.
- Taylor, Paul A., and Jan LI Harris. *Critical Theories of Mass Media : Then and Now*. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill/Open University Press, 2008.
- Toer, Pramodya Ananta. "Best Story; the Book That Killed Colonialism." *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/18/magazine/best-story-the-book-that-killed-colonialism.html?pagewanted=all>.
- Virilio, Paul. *Strategy of Deception*. London ; New York: VERSO, 2000.
- Wolin, Sheldon S. *Politics and Vision; Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*. Boston,: Little, 1960.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Plague of Fantasies*. Essential Žižek. London: Verso, 2008.
- . "The Spectre of Ideology." Chap. 1-34 In *Mapping Ideology*, 341 London ; New York: Verso, 1994.
- . *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Phronesis. London ; New York: Verso, 1989.