# A CRITIQUE OF LIBERAL CYNICISM

## Peter Sloterdijk, Judith Butler, and Critical Liberalism

## WILL BARNES

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*This goes out to real teachers and bodhisattvas, starting with my mum Diane and my wife Anais, and including: Peter Hughes, Tadeusz Skorupski, Mattia Salvini, John Taber, Iain Thomson, Ann Murphy, and Jay Garfield. Just a few of those who have given me more than I can repay. I'll try to pay it forward to my students for as long as I live. Thank you.*

# Contents

# Introduction

Refusing to wear clothes, performing intimate acts in public, sleeping rough, barking at strangers, begging for bones, and urinating on passersby may not be everyone's idea of practicing philosophy, but the Kynics were far from conventional. Coupling this exaggerated eccentricity with face-to-face argumentation, belittlement, and mockery, the "dogs" sought to expose the meaninglessness, hypocrisy, and arrogance of civil life. When the Kynical archetype Diogenes, who Plato described as "Socrates gone mad,"[1] was given an audience with Alexander, he famously asked the living god to get out of his sun.[2] Impressed, the emperor later said that if he could be anyone else he would be the tub-dwelling renunciate, appreciating that while he had conquered much of the known world, Diogenes's autarky was closer to true sovereignty than the dependence and fragility of political rule.[3] Operating within the boundaries of social life yet openly flaunting propriety, the Kynic was not outcast but outside caste, defiantly disquieting conformists with an unmasking glare and biting satire. Unsurprisingly Kynicism attracted a mixed response, and after transforming into a form more amenable to Roman civility, was absorbed into Stoicism and eventually relegated to the cultural periphery. Capturing a familiar mood, Hegel said that "there is nothing particular to say of the Kynics," that "they possess but little philosophy,"[4] and that they were "swinish beggars . . . worthy of no further consideration."[5] Although attracting some weighty admirers in the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and post-Enlightenment eras,[6] this admiration was highly qualified and from the fringes of mainstream philosophy, defying the general view that after its demise in antiquity, Kynicism has descended to a historical artifact.

This low status is attested to by the crude anecdotes which remain in the popular consciousness and by cynicism's contemporary usage meaning both the view and the embodiment of the view, that outwardly selfless or honorable people are ultimately self-interested and immoral. Indeed, contemporary cynicism is a very different creature, sharing little with its namesake, (from here on, I will refer to Greek Kynicism and the appropriations thereof

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mentioned in this book with a "K" and refer to contemporary cynicisms with a "C"). When Kynicism criticized conventional values, it presupposed that happiness could be achieved through practicing natural virtues typically obscured by civilized life. By contrast, cynicism merely criticizes. Gone is the call for self-discipline, critical self-reflection, moral self-regulation, and harmonizing speech and act. Gone too, is the hope. From unscrupulous bankers and their nannied children to the mainstream rappers who sell them music, from presidents and politicians to the poor and unemployed, and from jaded social workers to welfare abusers, cynicism is "common sense," a collective, democratic, "realistic" view of things. Having gained anonymity through conventionality, the cynic has disappeared into the crowd and submitted to late capitalism. As Peter Sloterdijk, the prominent philosopher of cynicism claimed: "where Diogenes expressed the wish 'Stop blocking my sun,' modern cynics strive for a place in it."[7] Today there are few Kynics, more cynicism, and the optimists have become the pariahs.

However, while the charge that we live in cynical times is familiar and the bitter cynic cuts a familiar figure, we may here risk being too cynical about cynicism. It is not necessarily toxic, it is not exhaustive of subjectivity, and it is not the opposite of moralism. Indeed, moralism and cynicism are two sides of the same pessimistic coin. Both offer armor against despair in a world they see as fallen, but while moralists seek to impose ideals, cynicism counsels complicity. Moreover, cynicism is ambivalent. To condemn the corrupt, cynicism remains within the conventions of purity and corruption. Therefore, when the cynic calls out purity as a sham, she remains invested in the very values she professes to dismiss. Even if the cynic resigns from the world it is a resignation compelled by persistent engagements, ideals, and values that relate to a belief in how the world should be, but isn't. Assuming with William Chaloupka that "telling a cynic to stop being cynical is like telling rain to stop falling,"[8] this dependence on persistent investments suggests the possibility of a more productive response than moralizing condemnations, smug endorsements, or broken submission. This book attempts such a response. It does so by clarifying the ambivalent structure of cynicism and responds to a form specifically associated with the ideals of freedom, justice, and equality. I chose to call this "Liberal Cynicism" to speak to cynicisms both within and beyond the academy which, although hailing from different contemporary political designations and in varying degrees of depth and specificity, claim, or remain committed to, despite protestations to the contrary, these liberal enlightenment ideals. This breadth includes both the differences in theoretical conceptions and the more colloquial ways in which people may identify as "liberal."

The thesis defended here is that Liberal Cynicism is a product of guilt and powerlessness stemming from the trauma of holding liberal investments in a

world in which they rarely flourish, in which they are perceived to have failed, in which they are vulnerable to critique. Consequently, the cynic is torn, and because of this, suffers. This pain can compel the Liberal Cynic to repress the efficiency of its ideals through a reification of hopelessness. This "Extreme Liberal Cynicism" is often rationally unjustifiable as well as intrinsically and instrumentally harmful. It is rationally unjustifiable if it denies dependency on, or reifies the inefficacy of, its constitutive idealism, if it assumes itself either post-ideological, post-idealistic, the end of enlightenment, or a natural conclusion of intellectual activity, and if it refuses self-critique. It is intrinsically harmful because it is painful. It is instrumentally harmful in virtue of self-perpetuation and enabling the problems that compel it: injustice, inequality, and oppression.

A specifically philosophical treatment of cynicism is a desideratum because prominent figures in twentieth- and twenty-first-century continental philosophy and postmodern theory, including Peter Sloterdijk, Slavoj Žižek, and Michel Foucault, have identified cynicism as a ubiquitous and uniquely contemporary problem.[9] A philosophical treatment is also a desideratum because, although there are many books on cynicism,[10] few go beyond diagnosing or moralizing,[11] and of the few that address its ambivalence, even fewer propose effective solutions.[12] For example, concerning the latter group of more nuanced treatments, even though David Mazella is wary of moralistic responses and lauds cynicism as an "invaluable critical concept,"[13] he merely points to mobilizing this ambivalence, says little of its pain, and nothing of its fecund latent idealism. Moreover, Louisa Shea argues that the positive elements of an ambivalent cynicism were purged by the enlightener's attempt to purify it, causing a branching-off in the eighteenth century of the respectable cynics, answering Diderot and D-Alembert's call for a "Diogenes of the Letters," from a form exemplified by De Sade who "paved the way for the contemporary cynic."[14] Thus, although holding Kynicism to be ambivalent, Shea rejects that contemporary cynicism is ambivalent, and does not theorize a response. Furthermore, while William Chaloupka argues that "cynicism is not uniformly an affliction or injury,"[15] that it must be overcome by a commitment to partake in the messy business of malleable political discourse, and that it nevertheless carries vital critical insights, Chaloupka also fails to mobilize this promise. Further still, Timothy Bewes defines cynicism as a variety of postmodernism, or at least inextricably linked with postmodernity, appreciating something of its ambivalence, and while Bewes's work is leveled against postmodernism as an ally of depoliticization he recognizes cynicism as a diverse concept and even speaks of an appropriation rather than rejection. Nevertheless, Bewes's notion of policing cynical decadence with critical postmodernism falls short of articulating a specific and politically viable normative aspiration. Finally, Sharon Stanley promises but does not

provide a form of democracy equipped to incorporate and benefit from cynicism. In this book, I attempt to fill these gaps by distinguishing and prescribing a skillful appropriation of Extreme Liberal Cynicism that can contribute positively to progressive politics.

To this end, I will be looking primarily at the work of Peter Sloterdijk and Judith Butler, both together and independently.[16] The main reasons for bringing together such unlikely bedfellows as Sloterdijk and Butler are first, that Sloterdijk has written the best philosophical treatise on cynicism; second, that Butler's "middle period" represents a form of cynicism increasingly dominant in the theoretical left; and third, that Butler's "ethical turn" signposts a way beyond it. My specific use of these two influential theorists includes defining Liberal Cynicism, in part, in contrast to Sloterdijk's model and appealing to Sloterdijk's largely problematic "solution" to cynicism for theorizing an auto-overcoming of Extreme Liberal Cynicism. I use Judith Butler in three ways: first, because their middle period is a good example of an influential form of Liberal Cynicism prevalent in contemporary American theoretical humanities. Second, because Butler's later work goes some way to recognize and overcome this problematic and popular perspective. Third, because Butler's fusion of Focauldianism and psychoanalysis provides grounds for theorizing a generally applicable heuristic for fruitfully engaging Extreme Liberal Cynicism.

The primary purpose of this book is to provide a critique of a dangerous and valuable popular cultural phenomenon within which lie the motivations and resources for overcoming its pernicious extremes, to theorize this overcoming, and show how this overcoming may contribute positively to progressive politics. Given Liberal Cynicism finds sure footing in portions of the contemporary academic humanities all too often reductive and overly dismissive of enlightenment liberalism, this book is also interested in contesting this hasty and dangerous disavowal.

## NOTES

1. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. Robert Drew Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 6.38.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 6.32.

4. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, Book I, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 479–81.

5. Ibid., 486–87.

6. Plutarch, Erasmus, Montaigne, D'Alembert, Diderot, Rousseau, the Marquis De Sade, and Nietzsche.

7. Peter Sloterdijk, Michael Eldred, and Leslie A. Adelson, "Cynicism: The Twilight of False Consciousness," *New German Critique*, no. 33, *Modernity and Postmodernity* (Autumn 1984): 190–206.

8. William Chaloupka, *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xv.

9. Also David Mazella, Louisa Shea, William Chaloupka, Timothy Bewes, Sharon Stanley, D. S. Mayfield.

10. For historical analyses of Kynicism see Luis E. Navia, *Classical Cynicism: A Critical Study* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996) and Donald Reynolds Dudley, *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the 6th Century A.D.* (London: Methuen, 1937). For a collection on the Kynical legacy see R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, eds, *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

11. Moralizing response include Jeffrey C. Goldfarb, *The Cynical Society: The Culture of Politics and the Politics of Culture in American Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), Richard Stivers, *The Culture of Cynicism: American Morality in Decline* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), Michael Lerner, *The Politics of Meaning: Restoring Hope and Possibility in an Age of Cynicism* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996), Ronald C. Arnett and Pat Arneson, *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age: Community, Hope, and Interpersonal Relationships* (Albany: State University of New York, 1999), Henry A. Giroux, *Public Spaces, Private Lives: Beyond the Culture of Cynicism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), Wilber W. Caldwell, *Cynicism and the Evolution of the American Dream* (Washington, DC: Potomac, 2006).

12. David Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), Louisa Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), Sharon A. Stanley, *The French Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Cynicism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1997), and William Chaloupka, *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

13. "Because it complicates some of modernity's most cherished self-images, its myths of rationality, dynamism, and progress" (Mazella, 7).

14. Louisa Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 28.

15. William Chaloupka, *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xv.

16. Another reason is to resist this culture of homogenization as it manifests in the specific forms of Anglo-American centrism in contemporary philosophy, both in analytic philosophy's dismissive response to European philosophy or in the case of American continental philosophy, its increasingly homogenous appropriation of French post-structuralism. Indeed, that one is asked to justify focusing a work of contemporary continental thought on Peter Sloterdijk, one of the best-selling European philosophers of the last six decades, indicates the problem.

# PART 1

# Two Cynicisms

# Part 1

## *Introduction*

Part 1 defines "Master" and "Liberal" Cynicism by engaging the existing theoretical literature and some illuminating literary examples. The primary purpose of focusing on literary examples is to signpost the phenomenology of a complex experience without claiming to capture it.[1] The purpose of part 1 is to clarify the phenomenology, causes, and dangers of Liberal Cynicism and argue that it contains the motivation, impetus, and resources for overcoming its pernicious extremes. Chapter 2 defines "Master Cynicism," a post-ideological "enlightened" consciousness which takes advantage of naiveté, ideals, ideology critique, and enlightenment in the pursuit of power. It also explains why Extreme Liberal Cynicism is both poised to succumb to and ill-equipped to oppose, Master Cynicism.

**NOTE**

1. This focus on literary phenomenologies rather than psychoanalytic and psychological studies was chosen for several connected reasons. Through a literary phenomenology I hoped to imagine relatively simple cases analogous enough to forms of cynicism which the reader could attest to, and to provide a partly extra-phenomenological theory to explain it. And while a further reason to remain in the realm of literature was to avoid the mistake of attempting to psychoanalyze a general condition without psychoanalytic training beyond theory, I want to nevertheless propose forms potentially amenable to psychological, psychoanalytic, and psychiatric models.

*Chapter 1*

# Liberal Cynicism, the Dangers, and the Promise

Liberal Cynicism is traceable to investments in justice, freedom, and equality. It is distinct from Peter Sloterdijk's definition of cynicism as "Enlightened False Consciousness." It is also different from Slavoj Žižek's analysis of cynicism, which I call "Cynical Liberalism." While Sloterdijk's cynic disavows ideals due to the legacy of critique and the "Cynical Liberal" veils a commitment to capitalist excess beneath phony liberalism, Liberal Cynicism remains genuinely invested in liberal ideals and experiences a painful cognitive dissonance between ideology critique, persistent investments, and the perceived failures of liberalism. At its extremes, this can compel Liberal Cynicism to repress its constitutive ideals, a process that can manifest as Extreme Liberal Cynicism, which gives up on achieving justice, freedom, and equality. Extreme Liberal Cynicism is inherently harmful because, while it makes us feel better about the lack of justice, freedom, and equality, it results in a longer lasting and self-perpetuating melancholy. It is instrumentally harmful because it enables the conditions that compel it: injustice, unfreedom, and inequality. Despite these dangers, because Liberal Cynicism remains tethered to liberal ideals and a hard-nosed realism, it contains both the motivation and resources for avoiding its extremes and for contributing positively to progressive politics.

## ENLIGHTENED FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

In the *Critique of Cynical Reason*, still the seminal philosophical treatise on the subject, Peter Sloterdijk claims that a "discontent in our culture has assumed a new quality: it appears as a universal, diffuse cynicism . . . defined by its ubiquity."[1] Sloterdijk defines this ubiquitous cynicism as "Enlightened False Consciousness" a state "that follows after naïve ideologies."[2] Per

Sloterdijk, ideology is a pernicious normativity functioning on and within the individual yet constituted by the community and wider institutional context. Ideology is pernicious because it compels a false understanding, justifying both the agents' position within oppressive superstructures and the super-structures themselves. To refer to this ideological self-deception Sloterdijk develops Engel's notion of "false consciousness."[3] On this view, ideology critique exposes the deception, irrationality, and injustice of the dominant ideology to destabilize its normative grip for the sake of emancipation from oppressive, unreasonable, or unjust norms. Per Sloterdijk, the European Enlightenment movement includes the process of figuring out the limits of ideology and the possibility of a more truthful, just, and reasonable world in light of this critique. Per Sloterdijk, this ideology critique paved the way for cynicism: a complex characterized by melancholy and self-preservation undermining its investments in truth and justice. Per Sloterdijk, cynicism is enlightenment, turned on itself, and turned sour:

> Enlightenment does not penetrate into social consciousness simply as an unproblematic bringer of light. Where it has its effect, a twilight arises, a deep ambivalence. We will characterize this ambivalence as the atmosphere in which, in the middle of a snarl of factual self-preservation with moral self-denial, cynicism crystallizes.[4]

Sloterdijk locates the origin of this degeneration in the response to aggressive attacks by anti-enlightenment forces coalescing in violent opposition to rational dialogue.[5] In this context of dissensus, ideology critique was compelled to adopt extra-rational strategies: degenerating into "the polemic continuation of miscarried dialogue by other means."[6] For Sloterdijk, this propelled a (d)evolution of enlightened consciousness which was further catalyzed by ill-supported, absolutist, and hypocritical features within the fetal ideologies of the early Enlightenment. Which is to say, while the original enlighteners of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries exposed religious ideology, they were not free of pernicious dogmatic commitments and remained unaware of how certain material and institutional processes associated with the Enlightenment, as well as remaining vulnerable to further critique, misled, misinformed, and mistreated. Per Sloterdijk, the Marxists, the French moralists, Rousseau, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger unmasked aspects of this enlightenment naiveté, and in so doing, in effect, extended the lineage of enlightening ideology critique in revealing motivational mechanisms at or below the foundations of conscious life for the sake of certain emancipatory goals. According to Sloterdijk, this group and their intellectual progeny also suffered from ideological self-deception. This pattern was repeated with each generation of "unmaskers," and while the

unmaskings of previous false consciousness at each stage remained persuasive, the therapeutic, revolutionary, and ameliorative elements within these responses did not. A consequence was that the ideological superstructures critique revealed were increasingly deemed to be hegemonic. The final stage, "Enlightened False Consciousness" is a condition enlightened to the necessity of false consciousness. We will call this negative dialectical process whereby enlightenment descends into cynicism, "Cynicalization."

Sloterdijk's notion of reflexive buffering is the consequence of Cynicalization, a self-implicating preemptive affirmation of falseness standing between the cynic and fidelity to ideals: "This consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology: its falseness is already reflexively buffered."[7] Moreover, because cynicism presupposes its own ideological fallibility, it is uniquely impenetrable to ideology critique. While this acceptance of folly buffers against criticism, it also allows for knowingly embodying a false consciousness. Because of the preemptive refusal of alternatives, when compelled by pragmatic concerns, Enlightened False Consciousness reluctantly capitulates to the dominant ideology: which in our case is the unjust and unequal excesses of late capitalism: "Cynical egos . . . obey the rules of the game in the capitalist world without resistance."[8] Per Sloterdijk, knowingly perpetuating the system they bemoan, the resigned cynic becomes schizoid, exhausted, and miserable, suffering from a dissonance stemming from a disparity between how they live—a rote capitulation to the tyranny of mammon; what they pretend to believe in—liberalism; and what they believe—transcendental falseness:

> Psychologically, the contemporary cynic is a functional melancholic, able to abate the depressive symptoms to remain in a degree of comfort, to work. This is perhaps the key aspect of contemporary cynicism, the fact that it is actually an ideal comportment for professional success in a system where suspension of the ethical is so often the requisite for "progress."[9]
>
> To be stupid and have a job, that's happiness. Only the converse of the sentence reveals its full content: to be intelligent and to perform one's work in spite of it, that is unhappy consciousness in its modern form, ill with enlightenment.[10]

For Sloterdijk, this unhappy enlightenment finds its surest footing in contemporary ideology critique which, while once invested in exposing injustice and pursuing truth, is now content to find "extra rational mechanisms of opinion: interests, passions, fixations, [and] illusions"[11] beneath the professed positions of its opponents, reducing opponents' subjectivity to "necessarily deluded epiphenomena"[12] and assuming superiority over others in virtue of adopting "the correct false consciousness."[13] For Sloterdijk, by reducing debate to the avoidance of folly and attacking the opponent, ideology critique

fails its guiding normative aspiration of contesting injustice and untruth, in effect abandoning its constitutive hopes.

> The religious criticize the areligious and vice versa, whereby each side has in its repertoire a metacritique of the ideology critique used by the opposing side: the moves in the dialogue between the Marxists and liberals are to a large extent fixed, likewise those between Marxists and anarchists, as well as those between anarchists and liberals [and] one knows pretty well what natural scientists and representatives of the humanities will accuse each other of.[14]

This is the point where enlightenment, in the form of cynicism, turns on *its self*. Through ideology critique, the enlightenment project, which began with deconstructing the ecclesiastical hierarchy's false ontologies of power, came to target the notions of a God-made soul, rational autonomy,[15] and finally, the notion of free, true, "authentic," or transparent self. A consequence of this deconstruction was, when coupled with the exponential proliferation of anti-enlightenment criticisms, by the mid-twentieth century implementing political change based on the moral dignity, autonomy, and integrity of the individual was no longer a unifying aspiration. In this context, Sloterdijk argues, a fraught view of subjectivity as a chaotic war zone of competing interests and arbitrary material forces mirroring a cynical vision of social life propagated. This vision was fraught because the consciousness that housed such a view wrestled with an unwillingness to reject the possibility of a unified self yet felt increasingly compelled to do so. According to Sloterdijk, these anxious effects of critique manifested in crude and destructive forms of material and psychic self-preservation: "What is called a subject in modern times is, in fact, that self-preservation ego that withdraws step by step . . . to the summit of paranoia."[16] Sloterdijk continues: "the ego without metaphysics to be sure, presents itself as cognitively modest [but] slides into an explosive self-expansion because from this denial onwards, it stands absolutely alone vis-à-vis the universe. Only with this does the modern self-preserving and knowing ego achieve world dimensions."[17] This includes the view that the advancements of industrialized war compounded the critique-induced existential angst with a sense of profound material vulnerability that left fearful self-defensiveness bleeding into culture: sad, critical, hostile, and haunted by a sense of existential and economic precariousness. In short, while Socrates concluded that the unexamined life was not worth living, the cynic concludes that neither is the examined.

## CYNICAL LIBERALISM

Describing cynicism as "contemporary ideology's dominant mode of functioning,"[18] Slavoj Žižek shifts the critique of cynical reason into a more Marxist psychoanalytic context. Žižek adopts Sloterdijk's notion of Enlightened False Consciousness and the view that it results from the exhaustion of ideology critique culminating in the realization that removing the glasses of ideology is impossible. Žižek also shares Sloterdijk's view that exposing the errors of cynicism is unable to problematize it because the cynic assumes universal error.[19] But while for Sloterdijk the cynical consciousness pragmatically defaults to the status quo, Žižek raises the possibility of a more complex relationship between cynicism, late capitalism, and liberalism. Per Žižek, cynicism is ideology, a false consciousness belying an unconscious ritually internalized submission to the capitalist superstructure:

> What is repressed is not our non-belief, but our belief. People publicly pretend, "I'm cynical, I don't believe," and so on, but secretly you believe. . . . So why is this important? Because if it were as simple as that we live in a cynical age, then the critique of ideology would be effectively impossible. . . . In a totally cynical attitude, your answer would have been: So what? I know this. It's not serious. Are you kidding? We all know this, and so on. I claim that real-life mechanisms are much more refined. This very cynical denial is a way we mask, we obfuscate, we conceal from ourselves that we take our ideological premises much more seriously than we pretend to.[20]

By reflecting on Žižek we can come up with a persuasive account of a function of cynicism, which explains better than Sloterdijk how the cynic embraces capitalism even while "knowing" it to be flawed. For Žižek, while professing disdain at the ills of capitalism, the cynic behaves "as if" it holds absolute authority,[21] an acquiescence sustained by a tripartite psychic structure of concealing fantasies: (1) ideology critique of capitalism, (2) cynical distance, and (3) commodity fetishism. Žižek argues people know that money has value only because of the embedded socioeconomic relations, but their actions betray their true unconscious beliefs: that money is value. While the cynic criticizes capitalist injustices they resign to the impossibility of alternatives through a combination of Enlightened False Consciousness and the reification of capitalism. The third fantasy—money's promise of infinite commodities—ameliorates the cost of this denial.[22] These beliefs function to conceal the guilt of willful complicity within a system the cynic "knows" is both corrupt and contingent. Through this triad of psychic operations, the guilt associated with following late capitalism's ethos of brute self-interest is eclipsed:

Cynical distance and full reliance on fantasy are strictly co-dependent: the typi-
cal subject today is the one who, while displaying cynical distrust of any public
ideology, indulges without restraint in paranoiac fantasies about conspiracies,
threats, and excessive forms of enjoyment.[23]

As Adrian Johnston, the preeminent Žižek scholar, explains on his behalf:
capitalist liberal-democratic ideology allows "for individuals to be as dismis-
sive as they desire, precisely so that they find their conformity bearable as
something depersonalized, disowned, and thereby held at arm's length."[24]
Furthermore, along with the internalized submission to capitalism, through
ritualized practical reinforcement and absolutizing narrative cynics performa-
tively reify the illusion of its necessity. In Žižek's perspective, subjectivities
within the "Big Other" of late capitalism's Symbolic Order—the system of
morals, customs, laws, and norms that uphold the material and immaterial
structures of social life—are formed in response to that which they simultane-
ously performatively reinforce, compelled by the pursuit of psychic homeo-
stasis within an order erroneously deemed absolute: "The Institution exists
only when subjects believe in it, or, rather, act (in their social interactivity)
AS IF they believe in it":[25]

The formula of cynicism is no longer the classic Marxian "they do not know it,
but they are doing it" it is: "They know very well what they are doing, yet they
are doing it anyway."[26]

In this way, cynics aid and abet an unjust and destructive paradigm by assum-
ing themselves post-ideological jaded enlightened pragmatists, consciously
critical of, but unconsciously obedient, to the demands of capitalism.[27] We
will call this "Cynical Liberalism." While Sloterdijk's cynic is genuinely
ideologically exhausted, the Cynical Liberal unconsciously pretends to be,
and while Sloterdijk's cynic is unhappy, the Cynical Liberal, rather than sub-
mitting to the materialism and self-preservation of advanced capitalism out
of sadness, fear, and exhaustion, enjoys it, protected from guilt, sadness, and
critique by the fantasies of moral and intellectual superiority and limitless
potential consumption. However, unlike Sloterdijk's cynic, uncomfortably
and knowingly pretending to be liberal, the Cynical Liberal believes himself
liberal indeed, he "insists upon the mask."[28]

Within this context, we also have a framework to understand Žižek's
description of cynicism as both ideologically exhausted and ideological.
Since it provides a framework for meaning, cynicism is an ideology in the
descriptive sense. Since it is self-deceptive—permitting a pragmatic rejection
of liberalism while still publicly "believing" it—it is an ideology in the pejo-
rative sense familiar to critique, that is, false consciousness.[29]

## LIBERAL CYNICISM

Through a literary phenomenology of examples from Jess Row's "American Cynicism and Its Cure,"[30] we see that Enlightened False Consciousness and Cynical Liberalism cannot account for a popular form of cynicism. The purpose of focusing on literary examples is to signpost the phenomenology of a complex experience without claiming to fully capture it. Moreover, analyzing these examples enables us to signpost a common form of cynicism more ideologically fraught than Sloterdijk's resigned consumer and which suffers more than the Cynical Liberal. This form of cynicism is painfully torn between liberal hopes and pessimism. For this reason, I call it Liberal Cynicism.

Like Sloterdijk, Row's cynicism germinates in exhaustive and exhausted ideology critique which, assuming the necessity and falseness of all value paradigms, pollutes any ameliorative encounter with a self-fulfilling presupposition of its inevitable failure. Like Žižek, Row also adds a psychoanalytic layer to Sloterdijk's picture, but while the Cynical Liberal successfully eclipses suffering, Row's melancholy cynic fantasizes solutions doomed to fail. This failed fantasizing condemns the cynic to oscillate between false hopes and disillusion, all the while slipping deeper into a perpetually traumatizing re-fortification.

Per Row, cynicism stems from guilty privilege.[31] Row's notion of cynical guilt relates closely to Sloterdijk's "status cynicism," the embarrassment with which heirs of the Enlightenment view it. From this analysis, Row adds an inchoate consciousness of complicity with these failures as a valence of cynical guilt. Row also defines cynicism as definitive of contemporary whiteness[32] but this racializing is hugely problematic. Row draws examples exclusively from independent cinema, indie-rock, and "leftist" literature, erroneously erecting the middle-class icon of Harold in *Harold and Maude* as representative of "white" culture.[33] In truth, the cynical guilt Row diagnoses is representative of a predominantly white portion of the liberally educated American middle classes which combine a higher-education-born and uncomfortable disavowal of ideals and a sense of failed responsibility with the economic and existential precarity of being nearer the poor than the rich. Despite this error, Row's association of cynicism with guilt is an insightful contribution and worthy of closer analysis.

Row cites characters in Lorrie Moore's *Anagrams*[34] and *The Gate at the Stairs* as examples of this guilty cynicism. The protagonists are both poor and well-educated and claim to reject the conservatism of their working-class backgrounds for its ignorance and complicity in injustice, and the hyper-privilege, superficiality, and hypocrisy of progressive alternatives. Both sustain their alienation in part by choosing "exotic" lovers due to their

narcissistic desire to be seen a certain way rather than from genuine attraction. Both drift ghost-like through the world quietly enduring trauma, and responding with childlike fantasizing, barely managing to stay afloat through detached ironic observations leveling the profane and the profound in a trans-idealistic somnambular equanimity. Moore's characters are very modern and very cynical. The following quotes capture their crudest extremes:

> There was this to be said for sedatives: They help you adjust to death better.[35]
> Love is the cultural exchange program of futility and eroticism.[36]
> Meaning, if it existed at all, was unstable and could not survive.[37]
> Life is unendurable, and yet everywhere it is endured.[38]

Moore's admittedly exaggerated characters nevertheless approximate a social reality, and their cynicism is united by a traumatized, vulnerable, and detached negativity such that the painfulness and the causes of the painfulness of cynicism are only occasionally transparent to the cynic. Row uses Lauren Berlant's notion of "cruel optimism"[39] to argue that these examples reduce to a state in which, although alleviation is sought, "the object/scene that ignites the sense of possibility, actually makes it impossible to attain."[40] In making this connection Row invokes Berlant's diagnosis of our "neo-liberal" present as structured through "crisis ordinariness":[41] an everydayness prefaced on a sociality that is traumatized by a postmodern existential and material precarity which has "shattered" the dreams of an "ongoing, uneventful ordinary life,"[42] and left behind a battle-worn and trauma-born cynicism. Cruel Optimism is the consequence, a desperate and panicked attachment to fantasies that inhibit flourishing but allow people to cope through minimally motivating yet tragically unattainable hopes. The cruelty is that this optimism sustains rather than alleviates cynical melancholy.

We can distinguish two ways whereby Cruel Optimism curses cynicism. The first mirrors Sloterdijk's functional melancholic suffering in a "depressive stasis that could be called 'coping' faux-moral, selfish, and opportunistic, seeking material betterment as a shield from the radical disengagement of full-blown pessimism, perpetuating an unhappy getting-by, superficially optimistic about the next indulgence."[43] In Berlant's parlance, such cynics have promised themselves to a barely sustaining hedonism to avoid having to face up to what Sloterdijk defined as the "abyssal meaninglessness with which the deeply intelligent contemporary cynic is familiar."[44] The second is more deeply pained, seeing through superficial consumerism and restricting potential sources of escape to that which its guilt-ridden critique permits but tragically simultaneously prohibits. Row's first example, the protagonist from *Anagrams*—Benna Carpenter—rejects both the conservatism of her family

and the liberal progressivism of her adoptive community for incoherency, hypocrisy, and insincerity.[45] Manic, ungrateful, aggressive, and plagued by an isolating intellectual faux-depression, Benna is desperate for a reason to live: "I run downstairs and out into the street with my pajamas on, gasping, waiting for something—a car? An Angel?—to come rescue or kill me, but there was nothing, only streetlights and a cat . . . 'There must be things that can save us!' I wanted to shout. But they are just not here."[46] Out of this desperation, Benna seeks a lover capable of providing salvation compatible with her ideology critique. Thus, she rejects her white wannabe opera singer boyfriend and pursues a black Vietnam veteran upon whom she superimposes qualities that suit her fantasy of an authentic post-idealistic hero.[47] The fantasy frays and Benna leaves the relationship thoroughly disappointed because Darrel "just" wants to be a dentist.[48] As Row explains: "Darrel is this fiction's fiction, or, more precisely, this fiction's fantasy, its object of cruel optimism."[49] Benna believes herself to be anti-bourgeois, post-naïve, and post-ideological, and that thanks to the enlightenment she provides, Darrell should escape his false consciousness, but her critique and attraction are self-deceptive and distorting. The consequence is that, while hoping to embrace an alternative to her lineage's corrupt ideals through the love of the other, Benna fails to recognize the other at all. The conditions of her hope prohibit it. Her hope is cruel, but not just to herself. When Benna begins to wake up to her self-deception the trauma of the realization compels a deepened cynicism. Moore portrays this in tragic form, with Benna imagining herself the mother of a sweet five-year-old girl, ending the book with a heart-breaking descent into trauma-born delusion: "Life is sad. Here is someone . . . a gift I have given myself, a lozenge of pretend."[50]

Row also cites Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs* wherein Susan who, living under a false name to conceal an accidental infanticide, adopts a mixed-race girl and outsources her upbringing to an overworked and underpaid nanny, simultaneously facing up to and hiding from her past. Susan organizes a weekly support group for multiracial families in a Midwestern college town wherein resigned angry fatalism, mired in forms of racism of which the group remains oblivious, is thrown around with no solutions or hope offered in response:

> The Jews got reparations from the Nazis, but who actually got the money? Well-to-do Jewish grandchildren who hardly need it at all.[51]
>
> School is white. And school is female. So it's the boys of color who have the hardest time, and if they're not into sports the gangs will lure them in. I guess we already knew that.[52]

Row develops Moore's implication that this hopeless indignation is prefaced on a combination of insecurity and immovability concerning ideals and investments and exposes the "colorful" range of characters as from the same bubble of relative privilege. As Susan's put-upon nanny remarks: "it had all begun to sound like a spiritually gated community of liberal chat."[53] Susan's cynicism is similarly driven by guilt and, in assuming liberalism's inefficacy, results in a practical disavowal of liberal ideals. While Benna's optimism is cruel, Susan's group has abandoned it altogether. The cruelty here is absolute hopelessness.[54]

This guilty cynicism plagues those who, having floated above the bottom of societies' echelons, see themselves as among the scum on polluted waters, insecure about complicity in injustice, educated in critique, invested in justice and equality, and pained by their scarcity. Tragically, this pain is felt so deeply that it compels denial and fails the ideals upon which it depends. While this guilty cynicism may seek catharsis, immunized against hope by the universalization of despair it nevertheless remains trapped, experiencing temporary alleviation through indignant rage, ironic pseudo-levity, a neurotic hostility toward the world, and a special hatred for the idealistic and the "naively" liberal. This condemns Susan's group to a self-perpetuating cycle, leaving the cynics cynical and the world unchanged.

In this picture, a reason cynicism sustains itself is that whenever it verges on the self-awareness which would reveal its fantasy and reification, because this would also reveal its complicity in what it criticizes, it risks inadmissible guilt. This guilt and powerlessness are eclipsed by reifying hopelessness, replacing the trauma of seeing what is wrong and knowing it could and should be different with the assumption that illiberal forces are insurmountable. This is how, while it seems so unpleasant to the outsider, extreme cynical foreclosure of hope plays an ameliorative role. Crucially, this denial is never fully successful and the inevitable return of the repressed compels a panicked, irrational, and hostile refusal of auto-critique, ideals, idealism, and hopes, as well as calls for action. This picture fits Žižek's notion of cynicism as ideology and Sloterdijk's account of cynicism's predilection for fantasy, a condition where "a hard sense for the facts slides over into the fictional, the histrionic, and bluff."[55] However, unlike both Sloterdijk and Žižek's cynicism, this cynical hopelessness is maintained by a fantasized vision of the irredeemability of man, a coping mechanism for avoiding pain which tragically only creates a deeper pain, and adds self-deception, obstinacy, hostility, and irrationality, and worse still, perpetuates the causes of the pain it seeks to alleviate, trapping itself in a cycle of largely self-inflicted melancholy as well as precluding imaginative sources of contestation to the problems it laments. While Susan's group laments the ills of late capitalism, they nevertheless continue to live within it, unable or unwilling to imagine a society that is not plagued with

the same problems. In response, and overwhelmed by the worlds' problems, they assume an identity of hopelessness to eclipse the unbearable feeling of powerlessness. This also enables Susan's extremely cynical community to assume both moral and intellectual superiority. Moral superiority comes from assuming an association with the "correct ideals," and intellectual superiority from "knowing" their inefficacy. By contrast, Benna is overwhelmed by the falseness of ideology and fails to overcome it by fantasizing impossible alternatives. Nevertheless, both strategies are adopted to defend against future disappointment and by not having to doubt themselves. By presuming the worst, the cynical consciousness never feels let down, fooled, or deceived, and takes solace in having its suspicions validated. As Sloterdijk put it, wryly: "it is the universally widespread way in which enlightened people see to it that they are not taken for suckers."[56] In this way, this painful delusion sustains itself.[57]

Neither Enlightened False Consciousness nor Cynical Liberalism adequately account for these common forms of cynicism. Both lack the full self-transparency of Sloterdijk's cynic, neither breaks from an invested liberalism, and both suffer more than the Cynical Liberal. In calling out the hypocrisy and sham of attempted liberalisms, while critical of liberal ideals as ideology, Benna struggles with and ultimately fails a naïve liberalism in which she nevertheless remains invested. Susan's righteous indignation also belies persistent liberal investments albeit immunized against hope. Because neither is post-ideological, they are not Enlightened False Consciousness. Because both remain invested in liberal ideals neither are they Cynical Liberalism. Due to critique, Sloterdijkian cynicism suffers total ideological exhaustion and knowingly capitulates to consumerism while Cynical Liberalism is comfortably numb to the failings of liberalism. By contrast, although suffering a reflexively buffered universalization of liberalism's inevitable failure, or merely failing it, in both our examples the abandonment of liberalism is based on perceiving it as a necessary failure. While Benna and Susan suffer from guilt, powerlessness, fantasy, conflict, denial, defeatism, rage, despair, and Cruel Optimism, Sloterdijk's cynic is merely pragmatically resigned. The cynicism our examples signpost is hostile, pseudo-realistic, worryingly self-reflexive, in a fraught relationship with ideals, and crucially, painful. A definitive feature of this Liberal Cynicism, distinguishing it from other cynicisms, is its suffering and its response to that suffering.

## LIBERAL CYNICAL PAIN

On Sloterdijk's account, cynicism suffers from a persistent niggling melancholy traced to an alienating discrepancy between its deeds and the values it once held but has now rejected: between pragmatic ideological affiliation

and enlightened falseness. But can a disparity between practical reason and (un)belief account for cynicism's obstinacy, insecurity, self-destructiveness, obliviousness, defensiveness, rage, and despair? If cynicism merely feigns pragmatism and idealism, the tension between practical reason and conscious belief wouldn't compel the painful dissonance of a schizoid and miserable cynic. If our analyses signpost real cynicisms, then there is reason to seek an alternative model to account for this phenomenological and psychological complexity. My thesis is that these familiar varieties of cynicism are better explained as originating in a tension between equally authoritative but incompatible impulses, specifically between ideals, ideology critique, and deep disappointments, or pain.

Given this view of cynical grief emanating from dependence on genuine commitments to liberal ideals is the pivot around which the arguments in this book move, we need to establish further why to suppose it. Firstly, it better explains both Sloterdijk and Row's analyses and our model of Žižekian Cynical Liberalism. This idea is inchoate in Sloterdijk who, although defining cynicism as post-ideological, speaks to its liberal investments. This can be seen where he describes the cynic as burdened by, rather than insisting on, the dominant ideology, and that the cynic's melancholy includes mourning a prohibited innocence which results from seeing its idealistic hopes crushed under the weight of perceived material, economic, and existential precariousness:

> Within this unhappy consciousness, there remain the echoes of ideals quite distinct but the tendency is to assume, if I don't act, someone else will, and I will lose my place, the place into which I am so unknowingly habitually ingrained that I cannot envisage an alternative. In this sense, the cynic feels simultaneously as victim and as martyr—behind the façade of collaboration, there is a vulnerable unhappiness and the need to cry for lost innocence, for the haunting dreams of a radically improved situation.[58]

Sloterdijk also describes cynicism as knowingly going against its better knowledge: "To act against better knowledge is today the global situation in the superstructure: it [cynicism] knows itself to be without illusions and yet to have been dragged down by the 'power of things.'"[59] A good way to make sense of these echoes, dreams, better knowledge and subordination to the power of things, is to posit a cynicism composed of persistent ideals whose realization is repeatedly thwarted. Put simply, we are not nostalgic about what we no longer value. Furthermore, when Sloterdijk claims that cynics "struggle to live with the plurality of ideologies,"[60] and reduces debate and critique to hostile competition in defense of the "correct falseness," why would Enlightened False Consciousness have opponents? Let alone feel compelled to attack specific ideals/ideologies? Moreover, if cynicism is

"post-ideological," merely feigning investment, then why feign liberalism? There are surely alternative masks. Sloterdijk claims that cynicism belies an equal distaste for all ideologies but if this were true the cynic would have no intellectual motivation to "take a side." In the examples Sloterdijk provides of debates between cynical Marxists, Liberals, and Anarchists, he claims that they reduce to "arguments about the right way to be pessimistic,"[61] but why would a consciousness exhausted of commitments recognize a right way? The notion of an invested cynicism better explains these familiar behaviors. To explain further, the competition to expose and refute the "opponent," indeed even the possibility of recognizing an opponent, must be prefaced on a latent valuation of specific ideals. By contrast, for truly ideologically exhausted cynicisms there are no investments. For example, while the Marxist, Liberal, and Anarchist cynic may be suspicious of their own claims to be beyond false consciousness, they nevertheless regard this false consciousness as superior to alternatives. The same would be true for any cynic desperate to refute its opponents. Nor could we argue that the desire to be recognized as intellectually superior could explain this partiality, for if it were, the cynic would be content to refute all views, including its own, and would actively disassociate from every and any position. So, not only does Sloterdijk's cynic value intellectual superiority, but they also value a specific theoretical framework. The hostility then comes from combining this sustained commitment with highly tuned critical faculties, a fraught combination of superiority and vulnerability. This is the kind of dissonance likely to manifest in panic when its "affiliations" are challenged, prefaced on the fragile hope of being the least naïve. Again, the notion of an invested cynicism better explains Sloterdijk's analysis than Enlightened False Consciousness.

There are also reasons internal to Cynical Liberalism to prefer my model of Liberal Cynicism. For Cynical Liberalism, Enlightened False Consciousness functions only at the level of conscious self-identification and belies an unconscious ritually internalized commitment to capitalism. A key element in this picture is the assumption of a constitutive and inadmissible guilt or discomfort with the ills of capitalism, for it is the repression of which that manifests in the tripartite psychic structure of professed criticisms of capitalism, cynical resignation in response, and commodity fetishism. Therefore, the guilt or discomfort must remain an energetic source. But if there were no genuine commitments at its heart, this guilt would be incapable of fuelling repression and fantasy. It could be objected here that the social pressure to identify with liberalism could provide the libidinal energy through a super-egoic prohibition of illiberalism diverting its disavowal into an inadmissible guilt capable of fuelling this pattern of repression and fantasy. This could function however successfully the population responsible for upholding this normative pressure acts in accordance with it. My reply is twofold. First, why pick liberalism? It

is far from the only possibility in our normative culture. Second, even conceding this possibility, among the guilty cynics there are surely some, and I would wager most, whose guilt traces back to genuine "liberal" investments. The account of Cynical Liberalism has the cynic secretly enjoying the failures of liberalism, feigning a commitment to alleviate guilt but if not at some level committed, again, why would it insist on that particular mask? Surely there are other sources to alleviate capitalist guilt, wanton amoral materialism for example. Supposing idealistic cynicisms, torn between ideals, critique, and trauma in various degrees of transparency concerning their commitments also better accounts for this condition.

This account also benefits from explaining Lorrie Moore's characters, and since they speak to definitive features of common forms of cynicism we can surely attest to—hopelessness, rage against idealism, a peculiar hostility toward liberal idealism, proselytization, self-assertion, and a refusal to self-criticism—we can also suggest that it better accounts for real cynicisms. This picture of a genuinely invested but torn cynicism involves a pain compelled repression of hope. In repression, the subject bars trauma from entering conscious experience. But there are certain symptoms of repression, experiences or behaviors, resulting from the repressed investment and which exert continued influence upon the agent. Due to the censorship of repression, the agent remains largely unaware of the return of the repressed and is compelled to preemptively disavow it. Within Extreme Liberal Cynicism, this manifests in an inability to disregard and eradicate doubts sown by a latent idealism. In Benna's case, the repression refers to her liberal commitments and returns in a manic refusal of, and hostility toward, bourgeoise liberalism. In Susan's case, repression refers to the efficacy of liberal ideals, and its return is preemptively disavowed by irrational and hostile hopelessness. In both cases, repression is enabled and exemplified by universal and aggressive cynical critique, the assumption of intellectual superiority, and the refusal to auto-critique. Tragically, both have the consequence of failing the investments that compel them.

This model also better explains why hopelessness may be preferable to hope. The grief associated with the lack of justice, equality, and freedom in the world and vulnerability of these ideals to critique culminates in unbearable grief. Hopelessness is the manifestation of the repression of this trauma. When overwhelmed by the inhumanity of man and the critical instability of ideals, left feeling unable or incapable of intervening in a meaningful way, liberal hopes are unbearable. The reification of hopelessness validates and alleviates feelings of guilt, pain, and powerlessness. In this context, extreme cynical hopelessness provides a preferable option, a fantasy achieved by absolutizing the powers it opposes. Just as for the Cynical Liberal, this condition fantasizes its courage-to-truth, its ability to see things "as they are," because

the commitment to truth demands the belief that its fatalism is realistic and therefore superior to hope. At extremes, this results in a subjectivity devoid of responsibility and commitment to the structural conditions of the world. Within this explanatory framework, we can better explain why Sloterdijk's cynic, "feels simultaneously as victim and as martyr, the cynic feels victim to its vision of a brutal world which Sloterdijk calls its "cancer-ridden consciousness of reality,"[62] and a martyr for the optimism denied by it. Indeed, later in his critique, Sloterdijk gestures toward a notion of non-ideologically exhausted cynicism, more tormented than the bored hedonic of chapter 1, describing cynicism as "more melancholy than false"[63] and as "a consciousness that, under the compulsions of self-preservation continues to run itself, though run-down, in a permanent moral self-denial."[64] This is inconsistent with Sloterdijk's definition of cynicism as both false and enlightened to that falseness. A consistent picture, compatible with our analysis above, instead has cynicism's sense of victimhood and martyrdom as products of an unconscious wish-fulfilling reification of fantasies through which the cynic is immunized against the painfulness of hope.

This model also allows us to make good sense of cynicism's narcissism, hostile obstinacy, and arrogant dismissiveness. If part of the trauma that compels cynical repression is the realization that the possibility of its fulfillment is in the hands of a global community over which it has little control, then the short-term "solution" to this trauma works in part through disassociating itself from others. In our model, the failure of Liberal Cynicism's disempowerment is compounded by the realization that solutions require cooperation it deems unlikely. Which is to say, liberal hopes are radically dependent on, indeed vulnerable to, others. The reification of hopelessness enables a refusal and disavowal of vulnerable interdependency. Unsurprisingly, this disavowal of dependency would manifest in the assumption of intellectual superiority. This picture of a smug retreat into the comforts of fabricated independence also makes good sense of Sloterdijk's claim that the cynical ego "withdraws" into a "worldless inwardness" and that it "leaves reality behind."[65]

This picture also explains Liberal Cynicism's lust for attacking ideologies, ideals, and idealisms. Emanating from a latent inability to fully disregard the vulnerability and failures of its commitments, idealism is a threatening reminder of the Liberal Cynic's repression and this threat is met with a panicked hostility reflex targeting that which is repressed. Concerning why cynicisms prevalent within liberal culture reserve such vitriol for liberal ideals, because Liberal Cynicism is the consequence of the repression of liberalism, liberal ideals pose a unique threat to cynical denial. In this way, cynical vitriol stems from a panicked refusal of the returning repressed. Concerning the need to proselytize, self-assert, and refuse auto-critique, a cynicism suffering from fear and traumatized pessimism and reifying the forces that compel it to

eclipse pain needs to validate a hopelessness in which it doesn't fully believe. It is not surprising that this inauthentic hopelessness manifests as a panicked obstinacy and picks easy examples of naiveté to mock.

This fear speaks to another feature of cynicism's ill-eclipsed pain. In addition to a depressed sigh exclaiming that critique has gone too far, the cynic suffers a further fear: that it could go further. While assuming itself enlightened, Liberal Cynicism resists auto-critique out of a fear which emanates from its reification of hopelessness, the intuition that even its limited cynical agency expressed in refusal or resignation is a myth. Extreme cynical obstinacy incorporates a libidinal investment in avoiding this nihilism, sustaining itself through thinking: "I am right, therefore I am" a conviction panicked by this underlying fear that auto-critique will destroy the cynic's sense of intellectual superiority, forcing a loss of that to which the cynic desperately clings—itself. The response is that even with all its criticisms of naiveté, cynicism is arrogant, requires validation, and furiously resists self-interrogation. In short, panicked by an inadmissible fear that it is critically unstable, the Extreme Cynic must preserve its ego. Consequently, afraid of full self-enlightenment the cynic unknowingly holds on to its remaining naiveté and manically preserves a confused sense of self-worth through obstinacy, self-assertion, and proselytization. If it were objected that this condition of egoistic self-defensiveness in the face of intuiting the vulnerability of the ego is enough of a libidinal investment to account for the cynical hostility, proselytization, and desperate self-assertion, the question would remain, Why the specific relationship with Liberal belief? Well, the Liberal Cynic is egoistic as well as liberal.[66]

## CONCLUSION

For Sloterdijk and Žižek, cynicism is a temporally unfolded consequence of the Enlightenment built into the contemporary liberal paradigm. It is the result of the legacy of critique yielding to the tides of ideology critique and capitalism beneath a façade of liberalism. For both, the cynical consciousness discloses universal dishonesty and remains in a hypocritical relationship with liberal ideals, acting as if they are false, yet professing belief therein. While for Sloterdijk the consequent complex is "schizoid and miserable" for the Cynical Liberal, pain is avoided through critiquing illiberalism, feigning cynical resignation, and commodity fetishism. On both accounts, cynicism is both invested and not invested in liberal ideals, a contradiction rendering these accounts suspect. Although in practice its ideals are that of brute capitalist self-interest, Cynical Liberalism is compelled by guilt that traces back to contrary investments. And while Sloterdijk's cynic is ideologically

exhausted, it mourns for "lost" liberal ideals crushed under the weight of a crude view of contemporary life. Reflection on this tension helped us distinguish a cynicism torn between liberal ideals and their perceived failures, beleaguered and in pain. This picture benefits from rendering Sloterdijk's picture and Liberal Cynicism consistent, fitting our examples, and better accounting for cynicism's hopelessness, rage against ideals, and peculiar hatred for naïve liberalism, as well as its need for validation, its need to proselytize, and its refusal to auto-critique. The inverse of Cynical Liberalism, this cynicism acts as if liberalism were false while believing it to be true, suffering from a painful cognitive dissonance as a consequence. While it hurts, the causes of this pain are repressed. As such they are likely to manifest in superiority complexes, ennui, indignance, rage, despair, self-assertion, irrationality, reification, and aggressive anti-idealism. While professing to be anti-idealistic and post-ideological, it is not: its painfulness and insecurity evince persistent liberal investments manifest in self-deceptive forms. We will call this "Extreme Liberal Cynicism."

In our first example, torn between ideals and critique, Benna Carpenter regards positive individual and political transformation in line with liberal ideals as desirable but fails them due to insincerity, critique, and trauma. In this form, Extreme Liberal Cynicism fantasizes a post-idealistic and post-ideological status. In the second example, while assuming liberalism's superiority, Susan absolutizes its inefficacy, more explicitly abandoning it. Both cynicisms then, as well as invested in ideals, are hypocritical and insufficiently self-critical. In the first case, in failing to recognize dependency on ideals and failing to apply the same degree of criticism it applies to others to its own. In the second, in its "secret commitment"—concealed by a self-confident pseudo-realism—to the superiority of liberalism and its absolute inefficacy. We will hereafter associate Extreme Liberal Cynicism with hypocritically insufficient self-critique as well as the failed avowal or abandonment of its constitutive idealism, labeling these forms of "Inauthentic Ideology Critique." Taking "inauthentic" to refer to this combination of ideology critique and emotionally compelled denial, this charged language is appropriate as it represses the fear of vulnerability to critique and the appearance of naiveté, a vulnerability which compels hostility, a self-sustaining obstinacy, and a neurotic delight in exposing the folly of idealists, particularly "naïve" liberals, and for normalizing their pariah status. This inauthenticity is a manifestation of repression. In Benna's case, the repression refers to her liberal commitments and returns in a manic refusal of, and hostility toward, bourgeoise liberalism. In Susan's case, repression refers to the efficacy of liberal ideals, and its return is preemptively disavowed by a reified and hostile hopelessness. In both cases, repression is enabled by universal and aggressive cynical critique, hopelessness, assumption of intellectual superiority, and the

refusal to auto-critique and has the consequence of failing to serve the investments that compel it.

Our analysis has revealed pain as the inherent problem of extreme cynicism and evidence of a constellation of ideals persisting within it. This structure may have positive consequences for mounting a response. Firstly, if Liberal Cynicism were, as it professes, post-idealistic or indeed post-ideological, then immanent critique would be effectively impossible, but it isn't, therefore, the possibility remains. If its constitutive idealism and unsuccessfully pain-relieving fantasy were made apparent, so too may the motivations for an overcoming which, coupled with cynicism's critical will-to-truth, could drive a transformative self-interrogation. Liberal Cynicism then, may contain both the motivation and resources for avoiding its pernicious extremes.

## NOTES

1. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3.

2. Ibid., 5.

3. "Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker. Consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown: otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives." Friedrich Engels, "Engels' Letter to Mehring," in *The Marx-Engels Correspondence: The Personal Letters, 1844–1877: A Selection*, trans. Fritz J. Raddatz (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981).

4. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 22.

5. "Enlightenment wants to talk about things hegemonic powers and traditions prefer to keep quiet about: reason, justice, equality, freedom, truth." Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 14.

6. Ibid.

7. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 331.

8. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 479.

9. Ibid.

10. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 153.

11. Ibid.

12. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 15.

13. Peter Sloterdijk, Michael Eldred, and Leslie A. Adelson, "Cynicism: The Twilight of False Consciousness," *New German Critique*, no. 33, *Modernity and Postmodernity* (Autumn 1984): 190–206.

14. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 20.

15. "Reason sits, so to speak, behind a grating through which it believes it gains metaphysical insights, but what at first seems like knowledge (Erkentinis) proves to be self-deception under the light of critique," Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 35.

16. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 355.

17. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 131.

18. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 28.

19. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 29–30.

20. Slavoj Žižek, "The Specter of Ideology," in *The Žižek Reader*, eds. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (London: Blackwell, 1999), 74–75.

21. "It may be that the 'official' ideology of our society is Christian spirituality, but its actual foundation is none the less the idolatry of the Golden Calf, money," ibid., 75.

22. For Žižek, this enables the cynic "to accept the way things effectively are—since they have their fetish to which they can cling in order to cancel the full impact of reality." Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 14.

23. Slavoj Žižek, "Re-visioning 'Lacanian' Social Criticism: The Law and Its Obscene Double," in *Interrogating the Real*, eds. Rex Butler, and Scott Stephens (London: Continuum, 2005), 305. This is also explained in Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 18; Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 4; Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 105, 120; Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: The British Film Institute, 2001), 166.

24. Adrian Johnston, "The Cynic's Fetish: Slavoj Žižek and the Dynamics of Belief," *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* 9, no. 3 (2004): 264.

25. Slavoj Žižek, *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* (Seattle: University of Washington Press. 2000), 26.

26. Žižek,"The Specter of Ideology," 61–62. Žižek here cites Karl Marx, "Chapter 1: The Commodity," in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 125–56.

27. "The modern subject explicitly claims not to believe, while in his unconscious he does so," Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2002), ciii. And "we perform our symbolic mandates without assuming them and 'taking them seriously,'" Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 70.

28. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 29–30.

29. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 30.

30. Jess Row, "American Cynicism and Its Cure," *Boston Review*, May 18, 2015, https://bostonreview.net/articles/jess-row-american-cynicism/.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. Lorrie Moore, *Anagrams: A Novel* (New York: Knopf, 1986), and Lorrie Moore, *A Gate at the Stairs* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).

35. Ibid., 12.

36. Ibid., 12.

37. Moore, *Anagrams*, 130.

38. Ibid.

39. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.

42. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1–10.

43. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason,* 460.

44. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 1987.

45. "Despite our various ways of resembling yuppies . . . we hated yuppies" Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 29.

46. Moore, *Anagrams*, 89.

47. Benna fantasizes that Darrell is capable of "such moral anger," "astonishing gestures," and "huge moments" when actually he is an aspiring dentist. Moore, *Anagrams*, 89.

48. Moore, *Anagrams*, 191–94.

49. Row, "American Cynicism and Its Cure."

50. Moore, *Anagrams*, 225.

51. Moore, *Anagrams*, 156.

52. Moore, *Anagrams*, 155.

53. Moore, *Anagrams*, 188.

54. Row's account captures Sloterdijk's description: "In the new cynicism, we see a detached negativity which scarcely allows itself any hope, at most a little irony and self-pity." Sloterdijk, Eldred, and Adelson, "Cynicism: The Twilight of False Consciousness," 194

55. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 473.

56. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 473.

57. In a rare moment of clarity, when the protagonist of *A Gate at the Stairs* breaks up with her Muslim boyfriend, she initiates an argument about the problems with Islam and while she drifts off into a daydream where he is a terrorist, he pithily diagnoses her cynicism: "You feel you have a kind of wisdom, very mistaken, but a mistake of some power to you, and you sadly treasure it and grow it." Moore, *Anagrams*, 206.

58. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*.

59. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 6.

60. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 7.

61. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 98–99.

62. Sloterdijk, Eldred, and Adelson, "Cynicism: The Twilight of False Consciousness," 190–206.

63. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 87.

64. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 5.

65. Ibid.

66. This complex mixture of fear of further enlightenment, refusal to auto-critique, and hostility for its own ideals can be measured by cynicism's association with irony which, from Benna's and Susan's sarcasm to the sardonic irony of "left" satirical comedy, and the Tumblr vs. 4chan online culture wars, etc., is an easy association to spot. While Sloterdijk notices cynicism's penchant for irony, he does not psychoanalyze

the emotional purpose cynical irony plays, and Žižek assumes it a tool whereby the unconsciously subservient cynic furthers the ends of late capitalism. Our model can explain irony as a mechanism through which cynicism may attempt to alleviate cognitive dissonance. Irony suits a condition torn between avowal and disavowal and exhibiting a panicked contempt for idealism. This association also suits a liberally invested cynicism as a failed response to suffering. Just as irony offers an escape from the risks of commitment, cynicism offers an escape from the pain of unrealizable hope. To ironicize hope, is to arm against the pain of its failure. This is a negative kind of freedom: from the grief, which belief in justice, nonviolence, and equality, etc. can provoke in a world where such ideals struggle. But this is a false promise, a fantasy, an object of Cruel Optimism, because of a crucial difference between irony and cynicism. Invested cynicism never breaks free from its constitutive ideals. It may repress or deny them, but it cannot escape their pull. That which Liberal Cynicism seeks to be free from is necessarily constitutive of it, and so it finds itself in a bind, attempting but failing to detach from itself. Because invested cynicism is a traumatized response to failed hope, hope is, therefore, its necessary condition. Thus, cynicism, by attacking the very values on which it depends, cannot provide the freedom it promises, from the pain of hope in a world it deems corrupt. For a prolonged discussion of cynical irony see Will Barnes, "The Rise of Cynical Irony," in *Distributing Worlds through Aesthetic Encounters*, eds. Josh Stoll and Brandon Underwood (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2017).

## *Chapter 2*

# Master Cynicism

When Yeats famously lamented that "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity,"[1] he could have easily have been defining what we will call here "Master Cynicism," a condition of virtually value-baron uninhibited duplicitousness operative at the top of society. "Master Cynicism" is uninhibited by guilt, fear, or pain, it is *more successfully* post-idealistic than Liberal Cynicism, and takes advantage of ideals, naiveté, ideology, and cynicism in the pursuit of power. On the Sloterdijkian model, at the emergence of cynicism at the Enlightenment, one group attempted to abandon dogma and perpetuate reason and justice, and another used the truths and illusions revealed by the Enlightenment for retaining power. For us, the former is the forefather of Liberal Cynicism and the latter, of Master Cynicism, which we take up from Sloterdijk's mention of a "modern, self-reflective master's cynicism, . . . the manipulative tendencies of those in power."[2] The model of Master Cynicism developed here is indebted to Sloterdijk's analysis of this thoroughly postmodern Machiavellianism:

> [at] the height of conscious statesmanship, serious thinking is invaded by signals attesting to a radical ironicization of ethics and of social convention. It is as if the general laws were only meant for the stupid, while those in the know smile with fatal cleverness. More precisely: the powerful smile this way . . . no longer imbued with communal loyalty or sympathetic to any recognizable code of conduct, we have exemplars looking down at the ants from the glass palaces of the financial elite, in the courtrooms, in parliament, even the palace. . . .The French moralists called it self-love (amour-propre); Nietzsche called it the will to power. If Marxism spoke in psychological terms . . . it would call its original motive the striving for profit.[3]

The former is the forefather of Liberal Cynicism and the latter of Master Cynicism, a concept developed from Sloterdijk's mention of a "modern, self-reflective master's cynicism" which he describes as "the manipulative tendencies of those in power."[4] The term "Master Cynicism" was first used by

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Alan Keenan,[5] and the moves in this chapter benefit from Keenan's tripartite distinction between (1) the power-wielding "master cynic" (2) the "cynical insider" who benefits from their participation, and (3) the "outsider," victim to the whims of the powerful and either continuing to conform out of desperation or succumbing to an apathetic resignation upon realizing their status. This three-fold classification maps onto the distinction laid out in this book between Master, Mastered, and Extreme Liberal Cynicism. By developing and adding to Sloterdijk's literary genealogy of cynicism we can distinguish Master Cynicism as structurally distinct from Liberal Cynicism and begin to explain the unique threat that it poses.


## MEPHISTOPHELES


Sloterdijk's "first model of modern master's cynicism" is Goethe's Mephistopheles,[6] who, "if his horns and claws are taken away," Sloterdijk writes, "there remains of Mephistopheles nothing more than a bourgeois philosopher."[7] Therein, the devil's representative uses ideology critique to manipulate his victim into surrendering power. Encouraging and appealing to Faust's predilection for epistemological relativism, which Sloterdijk calls "knowledge cynicism,"[8] Mephistopheles promises an escape from confusion, uncertainty, and despair by persuading Faust, first, that his conscience is a remnant of an archaic, irrational, and superstitious worldview and second, by selling hedonism as a justifiable alternative to the pursuit of wisdom. Faust represents our Liberal Cynic, torn between the competing impulses of enlightened ideals and ideology critique, while Mephistopheles is the Master Cynic, concealing sense-materialism and brutal self-interest behind fashionable and socially acceptable masks. He is exploitative, cultivated, and happy. Appearing at the peak of Faust's suicidal despair, Mephistopheles is the inversion of Clarence to George Bailey[9]—an "angel" offering a perspective upon which life is made possible—only here a hell's angel, who entices the despairing enlightener by offering to pacify his tortured soul with the promise of experience unfettered by moral constraints. But, of course, like extreme cynicism, the sacrifice is not worth the reward, and Faust's tortured soul, while freed from indecision, is condemned to despair: Sloterdijk concludes: "[Faust] would gladly banish the Devil back into the shape of the Kynical dog, or still further, into that of the snake. But all paths back to naivety are closed to him."[10]

## THE MARQUISE DE SADE

A figure conspicuously absent in Sloterdijk's genealogy is the Marquise De Sade, who on our analysis, turns out to the apotheosis of Master Cynicism. In the Marquise De Sade's *Philosophy in the Boudoir*,[11] the "cynic Domancé" shamelessly veils a philosophy of sexualized dehumanization and cruelty beneath a skillfully perverted liberalism. In his manifesto for a new French revolution, entitled "Frenchmen, Some More Effort if you wish to become Republicans,"[12] De Sade mounts a deconstruction of liberty as an aside during the brutalization of a child. By seducing and contorting Eugene's vulnerable and naïve lust for freedom into grotesque cruelty, like Mephistopheles did Faust, Domancé erodes the remaining humanity from his victim and replaces relativistic confusion and uncertainty with sociopathic single-mindeness, again assuaging a polarized and multi-voiced conscience into life-denying absolutism. The argument is skillfully structured, beginning from acceptable liberal premises to increasingly radical conclusions in a gradual excitation and deconstruction of liberal ideals. Dismissing the possibility that corrupt religious institutions could be reformed, De Sade's mouthpiece Domancé argues instead that liberty requires that religion be violently extinguished. Since the refusal to admit the possibility of religion coexisting with freedom is a very attractive position to many revolutionaries, this line of argument aims at seducing liberalism into the glamour of violence, calling for "authenticity" and "sincerity" through the "completion" of the enlightenment project, a completion amounting to the violent destruction of all which opposes it, specifically, to extend critique from liberatory protest to iconoclasm, and ultimately, annihilation:

> O you who have axes ready to hand, deal the final blow to the tree of superstition; be not content to prune its branches: uproot entirely a plant whose effects are so contagious. . . . Let the total extermination of cults and denominations, therefore, enter into the principles we broadcast throughout all Europe. Let us not be content with breaking scepters; we will pulverize the idols forever.[13]

With a strategic exculpation and unyielding self-interest, Domancé appeals to the morality of anti-egoism to deconstruct the rule of law, liberty, and property. For example, in bearing out the hypocrisy of a state where everyone is born equal, yet are rendered unequal by the rules of commerce, nepotism, inheritance, and prohibiting theft, Domancé performs the dangerous seduction whereby positive intentions and convictions, in a context of confusion and discomfort, are warped through deceptive intellectual bewitchment into dehumanizing fundamentalism. In this vein, De Sade inverts his challenge that the state is essentially immoral, by smuggling in an argument for

embracing egoism as the best model for virtue within such a state, building
an argument that survival requires identification with the dominant value of
self-preservation. This consciously concealed inconsistency belies the shame-
less self-interest of a fundamentalist argumentative rhetoric, where any ideal
is utilized under the domination of an unopposed impulse, in this case, the
impulse for sexual power, fueled by an inalienable self-righteousness invul-
nerable to experiential learning or logical elucidation.

Following this pattern of provoking compassionate sensibilities in order to
corrupt them, De Sade extends his critique of property in terms familiar to
feminism. The seduction begins with a persuasive premise that ownership of
people is immoral either in the form of slavery or marriage: "Never may an
act of possession be exercised upon a free being; the possession of a woman
is no less unjust than the possession of slaves; . . . all the ties which can bind
a woman to a man are quite as unjust as illusory."[14] Then, in an apotheosis
of cynical rhetorical transfiguration, De Sade argues that on the same logic
rape is justifiable. The "argument" is that once women have been freed from
the bondage of marriage, males are freed from the bondage of restraining the
drives for which marriage provided a legitimized outlet: De Sade's unyield-
ingly conservative definition of matrimony. Instead of lauding emancipation
from institutionalized misogyny, Domancé defends rape as the authentic
form of a natural impulse that our institutions and conventions repress:
"What objections have you to the ravisher? What will you say, when he
replies to you that, as a matter of fact, the injury he has committed is trifling
indeed, since he has done no more than place a little sooner the object he has
abused in the very state in which she would soon have been put by marriage
and love."[15]

The hyper-privileged hate criminal dons the mask of Diderot, Voltaire,
and Rousseau, deconstructing the anti-feminist misuses of virtue, modesty,
chastity, beneficence, charity, and sensibility, and yet, while the Philosophes'
deconstructions were motivated by truth and egalitarianism, De Sade's oper-
ate solely for cruel self-interested pleasure. Unfettered by guilt, Domancé
has no qualms about concealing his goals behind the pretense of conformity
to popular virtue and appeals to any ideals, argument, or rhetorical strategy
to do so. For example, he persuades Eugene to indulge in the basest betrayal
of a sexually weaponized matricide while preserving the outward appearance
of virtue. In Domancé we see the crudest example of Master Cynicism: the
abandonment of the good in the service of power. This is not the extremity
of cynicisms that resign in despair, this is Goethe's Devil among us, exac-
erbating and delighting in the demise of the least fortunate and conducting
unimaginable dehumanizations. Domancé is a grotesque extreme of the com-
fortably hypocritical cynic gleefully swapping disguises at the masquerade
ball in celebration of reductive materialism and brute self-interest. As Louisa

Shea's generous description from *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon* begins to explain, through Domancé De Sade represents enlightened liberalism destroying itself in the form of cynicism and releasing a deep potential for barbaric inhumanity as the result:

> Cynicism emerges in Sade as a philosophy of moral nihilism and self-seeking gratification that strongly presages our modern use of the term. [De Sade] has learned the lessons of the enlightenment . . . but rather than seek to build a better society on the rubble of the old, he retreats into an attitude of pragmatic opportunism.[16]

## THE GRAND INQUISITOR

Sloterdijk cites Dostoevsky's *Grand Inquisitor*[17] as a primary example of a "new cynical political conservatism"[18] akin to the Bill O'Reilly, Anne Coulter, Rush Limbaugh, and Donald Trump's preaching the neo-conservative virtues of crude selfishness, inciting violence against their opponents, and practicing as if poverty, inequality, and warfare are required for a progressive civilization, all the while facilitating the expansion of those monstrous dehumanizing fruits of industrial materialism, under a wafer-thin veil of social conscience. Indeed, the Grand Inquisitor's Machiavellian claim that "the state must know the truth before it can sensor it"[19] is a Master Cynical mantra. The story, as Karamazov tells it, has the Cardinal of Seville witnessing the return of Christ, but instead of paying homage, he has Jesus burned as a heretic. Unrepentant, he explains that Jesus's ideological naiveté poses unacceptable social dangers, arguing, in morose Hobbesian fashion, that civilization requires institutional domination based on deception.

For Sloterdijk, this provides a thought experiment through which a neo-Hobbesian conservatism can be investigated. While there is no necessary link between Master Cynicism and conservatism, nevertheless, conservative ideologies are more susceptible to it. This is because the sole ideal of Master Cynicism, power, appeals to conservativism's valorized notions of hierarchy and authority. Of course, Master Cynicism merely wants power, but this pursuit is compatible with the ideals of the protestant work ethic, duty, social immobility, obedience, and inequality. There are also crucial differences between conservativism and liberal progressivism that render the former more vulnerable to Master Cynicism. Today, the view that one's ideology may be contingent and should be subjected to critique occupies a privileged position within the collective imaginary. Although no less uncommon, the potential for auto-critique is more threatening to conservative than progressive ideologies because ideologies desirous of change are less threatened by

contesting their reified status and because critique has more to say against conservative traditions. Moreover, as we developed in chapter 1, cynicism succeeds by placating anxiety, confusion, and fear. Thus, while there is no necessary link between conservatism and Master Cynicism, it is no surprise that Master Cynicism successfully targets, and exploits traumatized, impoverished, and disenfranchised conservatives, specifically, their identity insecurity and economic precariousness. As David Mazella puts it in *The Making of Modern Cynicism*:

> The public impatience or disenchantment with the messiness of genuine discussion can only lead to them to embrace the one political actor able to act unilaterally in this system, the master cynic untroubled by others' scruples. This may be the reason why popular discontent and cynicism often do not lead in the direction of progressive reforms, as one might expect, but toward a still more conservative embrace of those who already project power and authority.[20]

Put simply, Master Cynics push back against freedom, tolerance, compassion, forgiveness, equality, social welfare and mobility, and the institutions that serve justice and the people from the perspective of anthropological arguments that humanity is essentially weak and self-destructive and needs an ordered framework of habit, certainty, and tradition to domesticate the natural tendency to barbarism: "Those invested with power can, in all ages, confidently assume that the great majority have a horror of freedom and know no deeper urge than to surrender their freedom, to erect prisons around themselves, and to subjugate themselves to idols old and new."[21] This is why, the *Grand Inquisitor* is a prototype of modern Master Cynicism, his bitter anthropology prompts him to believe that human beings must be, and indeed want to be, deceived. Human beings require order, which in turn requires domination, and domination requires lies. Within our dominant hyper-cynical political culture, the Master Cynics are those who want to rule and know that they must, therefore, make use of ideals as a form of seduction, and, if necessary, organized or disorganized private or public violence. For these modern masters, everything is a means to the end of power, including values, truth, and even people. As Sloterdijk puts it:

> Neo-conservatism benefits from exploiting the naivety it knows too well, that its minions must internalize certain fictions to carry genuine political influence, to mobilize the naïve will-to-work just as in dogmatic religious communities, don't allow the danger of critical reflection to turn on yourself, double the efforts to turn it onto others, concerning "us" stop reflecting, preserve your values! . . . Its strength lies in the fact that people have, in addition to a realistic fear of war and crisis, a fear of freedom, a fear of themselves and their own possibilities.[22]

The picture sketched here, of Faust's capitulation and Mephistopheles's and Domancé's desire for domination, depicts the nature and appeal of a strategically conformist power cynicism. While this Master Cynical consciousness is duplicitous, it is not torn. Neither Domancé, Mephistopheles, nor The Inquisitor recoil from cruelty, infamy, or deception, nor suffer cognitive dissonance when presenting themselves as virtuous. When the old Cardinal confesses that the church in the time of Charlemagne took the sword of worldly power into its own hands and sealed a pact with the Devil, the mood is one of pride and defiance rather than the cathartic release of therapeutic beginnings. This dangerous self-righteousness serves as a solution to the schizoid painfulness of cynical consciousness: the rulers' exercising of cynical domination is a sacrifice for the greater good of power and ameliorates any potential cognitive dissonance by masking cruelty under a martyr's hood: "For we who guard the mystery, we alone shall be unhappy. There will be thousands of millions of happy infants and one hundred thousand sufferers who have taken upon themselves the curse of knowledge of good and evil."[23] Per Sloterdijk, where Jesus's supernatural compassion and love rose above the base destructive forces of tribalism and retribution, the Master Cynics' self-imposed martyrdom enables them to feel as if they have transcended "basic" "unsophisticated" human compassion. With this analysis, Sloterdijk shows how the rise of institutionalized righteous indignation sealed the split of the religion of Jesus from the religion of ecclesia, after which point a compassionate community poses dangers to master power:

> It is the spirit of these institutions that is abhorred by any recollection of the magnificent primitive Christian freedom. . . . It is not religion as religion that has to burn the returned Christ, but religion as Church, as analogue of the state, as institution; it is the state that fears the civil disobedience the religious are capable of; it is the army that condemns the spirit of Christian pacifism; it is the masters of the world of work who have a horror of people who place love, celebration of life, and creativity higher than slaving for the state, the rich, the army, etc.[24]

For Master Cynics, ideals can be made an instrument of politics, useful intellectual apparatuses to be used in the pursuit of power. This leads to a vast ideological schism between the ruled—the unenlightened false consciousness of the manipulated; and the rulers—the reflecting elites who have overcome yet camouflage themselves under the nation's professed ideals. As the perfect spokesmen for Master Cynical power Machiavelli puts it: "There is nothing more important than appearing religious."[25] Sloterdijk defines this breed of cynicism as "without any illusions" yet realizing "the functional necessity

of illusions for the status quo," and as "the way enlightenment works in the minds of those who have discovered the origins of power."[26]

## A CRITIQUE OF MASTER CYNICISM

Master Cynicism is a strategic appeal to ideology critique and ideals in pursuit of power.[27] While it may express allegiance to liberalism, Master Cynicism is cynical *any-ism*, comfortably donning whatever mask is required to serve its desire for domination. As we saw, the Liberal Cynic is miserable due to an unresolved and painful struggle between ideals, ideology critique, and the world. Master Cynicism, by contrast, although split and hypocritical, replaces cognitive dissonance and psychological pain with disinhibited duplicity. Master Cynicism is rationalized and enjoyed without guilt.

Master Cynical shamelessness benefits from the history of ideology critique championed by the French moralists and Nietzsche, after whom the life-affirming liberatory purport once accompanying the critique of a worn-out, hypocritical, and imperialistic morality was disastrously purged. As Sloterdijk explains "the resonance Nietzsche enjoyed among the imperialism had its moral foundation in the cynicism of self-disinhibition."[28] This willful duplicity that prefigures fascism and totalitarianism "makes a continuum between a subtle philosophy and a brutal politics possible for the first time."[29] On this understanding, once the hypocrisy of altruism and profound uncertainty were mainstream hypotheses, the elite no longer need to appear moral or pay attention to facts. The previously inhibited duplicity has "shaken off existential ambiguities of all morality"[30] and enjoys a new nakedness. Consequently, rather than struggle with the vulnerability of ideals, Master Cynicism exploits it, securing rule and support not by its truth-value but by the promise of gain.

While Liberal Cynicism retains a melancholic disappointment with falseness, the failure of its ideals, and the atrocities of advanced capitalism, Master Cynicism embraces the status quo to which the Liberal Cynic begrudgingly defers, counsels complicity, and relishes the disinhibition ideology critique permits, capitalizing on moral, metaphysical, and epistemological decadence to seduce support. As Sloterdijk puts it "when confronted with illegal enrichment, with robbery, the [master] cynical reaction consists in saying that legal enrichment is a lot more effective and, moreover, protected by the law," or in the words of Bertolt Brecht: "what is the robbery of a bank compared to the founding of a new one?"[31]

## CYNICISM AND FASCISM:
## A TOTALITARIAN SEDUCTION

Extreme Liberal Cynicism enables Master Cynicism to reach such heights/ depths by failing to successfully oppose the unscrupulousness the masters have pioneered. This is a context we can all find ourselves in, where employees turn off the moral/ethical sociopolitical norms that govern their choices outside work and defer to the governing norms of the context/profession, which in commerce and, increasingly, in health care, education, and politics, is to shift a product. This workplace pragmatism sheds responsibility by accepting as permissible governing norms which have been allowed to evolve independently of registers tethered to the necessities of interdependent human community or indeed any nonprofit-based measurement of value. Without intervention, and when collected into corporations, this *teleological suspension of the ethical* produces forces beyond the sum of its parts which can develop into formidable destructive power. Within these domains, parameters of acceptable behavior change considerably, yet remain bolstered by a sense of corporate duty.

Liberal Cynicism, as we saw in the cases of Faust and Eugene, lies in a precarious relation to its distant, disinhibited, and happier cousin, mostly because its painfulness leaves it vulnerable to Master Cynicism's seductive power. There are several ways in which this can occur, the first relates to how subjects under Master Cynicism are seduced by its promise of assuaging the painfulness of hope within totalizing narratives foreclosing the vulnerability of commitment: "The fascist state, with its stifling confusion of capital and folk ideology, idealism and brutalities deserves a unique philosophical predicate; the cynicism of cynicisms."[32] As well as lauding his emancipatory commitments, theory of embodied vitality, and the courage-to-truth, Sloterdijk also places a great deal of blame at the feet of Nietzsche for paving the way from enlightenment to fascism:

> With Diogenes, under the slogan Remint the Coins, there begins what will be called by the neokynic Nietzsche "the revaluing of all values," the cultural revolution of the "naked truth." Nietzsche, of course, ruins the point. His revaluation turns the Kynical rejection of power into a will to power; with this he changes sides and provides the powerful with a philosophy of disinhibition.[33]

A similar ambivalence is found in Sloterdijk's reading of Martin Heidegger. While Sloterdijk welcomes Heidegger's critique of technological distraction and the somnambular of cynical conformism, he warns that early Heidegger's solution—authenticity—is extremely dangerous. From Sloterdijk's warning, we can account for Liberal Cynicism's unique vulnerability to the seductive

and disastrous power of Master Cynicism. This danger is best laid out in Sloterdijk's analysis of the Weimar Republic as an example of a culture analogous to our own. The most urgent feature of the analogy is that cynicism rendered the traumatized German spirit susceptible to the lunacy of National Socialism because it offered a solution to its pain based on a denial of vulnerability. For Sloterdijk, Heidegger's notion of Das Man[34] represents the contemporary cynic and was "inconceivable without the precondition of the Weimar Republic."[35]

In this reading, Germany's loss of World War I and the humiliation of Versailles compelled a collective encounter with alienation, disenfranchisement, and meaninglessness compounding the effects of the critique of traditional ideology on traditional values and identity per se. In response, the call rose for the romantic individual reimagined as the "authentic" self, a fantasy that laid the road to totalitarianism: "Only in the cynical, demoralized, and demoralizing climate of a postwar society . . . can an impulse be diverted out of the 'Zeitgeist' into philosophy to observe existence 'existentially' and to place everydayness in opposition to 'authentic,' consciously decided existence."[36] This downtrodden and confused cynicism was uniquely vulnerable to the seductively restorative narrative of authoritarianism because it promises to recrystallize a fractured identity, silence the voices of guilt, and close off the door to nihilism. On Sloterdijk's reading, the will-to-authenticity—the hallmark of Heidegger's romantic existentialism—captured a collective yearning and contained "the seeds of a demonic fascism."[37] Per Sloterdijk, "the politically naive Heidegger believed he had found in fascism a "politics of authenticity," and, along with the German pubic, was "deluded by the active, decisive, and heroic slogans of the Hitler movement."[38]

With this analysis, Sloterdijk lays out how a genuinely invested cynicism, traumatized and torn, can reach a point of despair and groundlessness rendering the need for salvation so great that it would swap its values for subservience to the seductive powers of heinous masters. Given we are seeing the reemergence of fascistic and totalitarian thinking and increasingly disinhibited duplicity in mainstream politics social and life, this analysis holds a timely warning.[39] The danger is that the invested cynic risks subservience under the cynicism of the masters, that is, Liberal Cynicism risks becoming a "Mastered Cynicism."

## MASTERED CYNICISM: *LUCIAN*

Per Alan Keenan, "insider cynicism" mimics the powerful due to a mixture of fear of economic precariousness and hopes to enjoy the riches the powerful may bestow upon them: this is a variety of what I theorize here as "Mastered

Cynicism." In *The Passing of Peregrinus*,[40] second-century Syrian Kynical satirist and rhetorician Lucian reports on an infamous event in the early history of Greek Kynicism. Specifically, the infamous episode where the Kynic Peregrinus martyred himself in protest of the hypocrisy and warped civility of attic culture by leaping onto the ceremonial pyre at the climax of the Olympic Games. In Lucian's report, Peregrinus's martyrdom is recast as an act of megalomaniacal theatrics charged with uprooting Kynicism's shameless parodic exposé of false idols and its adherence to bucolic ethics. But despite Lucian's claim to represent the lineage authentically, it is a cold and joyless laughter, far from the Menippean lineage, with which Lucian exhorts an entire sect to follow Peregrinus's example and commit mass suicide, preempting the forthcoming holocaust whereby hundreds of thousands of dissidents perished in the arenas and on the pyres of the Roman Empire. For a particularly disturbing example, Lucian remarks on the sight of Peregrinus's charred remains: "Is it truly not a charming sight to view a fried-up old manikin and, in doing so, to breathe in the foul fat-vapors?"[41]

Using both the hypocritical affiliation with "true" Kynicism and the cold-hearted cruelty and intelligence of the powerful, Lucian mocks Peregrinus's martyrdom as an unsophisticated and hypocritical attempt at exposing power as a "justification" for the pursuit of power in the form of posthumous notoriety. In the terms of our analysis here, the unique and disturbing vitriol in Lucian's criticisms reflect the outcomes of a complex form of self-loathing and denial and marks a split from ascetic countercultural Kynicism into forms prefiguring both Liberal and Master Cynicism. Lucian charges Peregrinus's martyrdom as driven more by a thirst for posthumous fame, status, and glory than it was to advertise the Kynical way of life, labeling Peregrinus a social climber, using whatever ideologies served his upward mobility. The reason for proposing this analysis of Lucian is that his career from self-proclaimed Barbarian to royal bureaucrat also required numerous compromises and ideological malleability. As a public servant of the Empire in Egypt, utilizing his talents to enforce his masters' power, Lucian sold his "authenticity" for a secure salary and domiciled stability then repressed the pain of this act. As a career rhetorician, Lucian mastered the methods of manipulation, exploitation, and deception, as well as materialism and social climbing, "qualities" he superimposed onto Peregrinus's comparably courageous asceticism. This potential for latent cognitive dissonance and unhappy consciousness manifesting in hostility toward its own ideals represents our vision of the Extreme Cynic. Lucian's tirade exhibits the torn schizoid consciousness of following what one ethically opposes as well as unacknowledged hypocrisy and unsuccessfully veiled dissonance compelling the gross mistreatment of his fellow Kynic. In this sense, Lucian represents an early instance of more

contemporary cynicisms. As Sloterdijk remarks, "Lucian's laughter reveals more hate than sovereignty. In it, there is the sarcasm of someone who feels himself put on the spot."[42] That this cold diatribe was on behalf of the powerful elite Peregrinus threatened signposts "Master Cynicism"—using cynicism in the service of power—and "Mastered Cynicism," the condition of being seduced by the promise of gain, bowing to the authority of the masters, and reducing agency to objective causes, thereby excusing disengagement with alternative ideals.

## MASTERED CYNICISM: *THE BIG SHORT*

Adam McKay's *The Big Short* can be seen to dramatize how moderate Liberal Cynicisms in a world of Master Cynicism risks being subsumed by it. The movie tells the story of Morgan Stanley trader Steve Eisman (in the movie Mark Baum), capitalizing on hedge fund manager Michael Burry and trader Greg Lippman's unearthing of the complex conditions that caused the 2008 financial crash. Eisman is a Liberal Cynic par excellence, veiling trauma and guilt beneath the critique of a system in which he fully participates, raging against Wall Street with all the hypocrisy, obliviousness, and anger of someone trapped in self-righteous denial.

> And I'm getting madder and madder and I ask this guy how he sleeps at night knowing he's ripping off working people and he just leaves. He doesn't say a word. He just walks away from the lunch. So am I fucked up or is he? . . . The banks have given us 25% interest rates on credit cards. They have screwed us on student loans that we can never get out from under. Then this guy walks into my office and says those same banks got greedy, they lost track of the market, and I can profit off of their stupidity? Fuck, yeah, I want him to be right! . . . We're going to wait and we're going to wait and we're going to wait until they feel the pain, until they start to bleed.[43]

The subplot follows Eisman's transformation from a functional melancholic into a resigned fatalist bereft of the energy even for vitriol, succumbing to a disinhibited duplicity and knowingly benefiting from the suffering of others. In the beginning, Eisman is angry at capitalistic parasitism and laments how the crash will hit the most vulnerable the hardest: "people are going to be doing what they always do when the economy tanks. They will be blaming immigrants and poor people."[44] But in his final capitulation, Eisman descends from a troubled liberal into a Mastered Cynicism. Eisman realizes that the crash was not just the consequence of ignorance and ineptitude but that many of the masters knew what they were doing and gambled that the government

would bail them out. And they did. After which they paid themselves huge bonuses and lobbied successfully against reforms. This descent is caused by the "realization" that things are worse than his phony critique could imagine:

> Wall Street took a good idea and made it into an atomic bomb of fraud and stupidity that's on its way to decimating the world's economy. We live in an era of fraud in America. . . . What bothers me isn't that fraud is not nice. Or that fraud is mean. For fifteen thousand years, fraud and short-sighted thinking have never, ever worked. Not once. Eventually you get caught, things go south. When the hell did we forget all that? I thought we were better than this. I really did. And the fact that we're not doesn't make me feel alright, it makes me feel sad, and as fun as it is to watch pompous dumb wall streeters be wildly wrong, I just know at the end of the day that average people are going to be the ones who are going to have to pay for all of this, because they always do.[45]

This realization cuts through Eisman's hostility and reveals his anger as the externalization of unprocessed trauma serving a cathartic purpose facilitated by a belief in the possibility of justice and the possibility that the financial system had not yet rendered it impossible. And when the catastrophe he has hitherto fetishized happens, this angry cynicism is revealed as futile and the pained values out of which it was born return to the surface. For Eisman, this is the love for his lost brother, and his patient, caring, and loyal wife. Tragically, once Eisman's cynicism is revealed as a consoling carapace, rather than take responsibility, Eisman submits to a darker illusion: that his complicity was not reprehensible but an inevitable reflection of unavoidable systematic corruption—he reifies his powerlessness and reduces his agency to the inevitable consequence of objective circumstances. Consequently, Eisman sees no problem in benefiting from doomsday and, exculpated by his own *cancerous vision of the world* takes the money and runs. One imagines Eisman reiterating this performance—benefiting from the suffering of others sustained by "enlightenment" to the irredeemability of humanity—until his cynicism is virtually indistinguishable from the disinhibited duplicity of the masters giving speeches on the ills of the financial system while benefiting from it. Although Eisman's cynicism resembles that of his masters, it remains distinct from, and subservient to, Master Cynicism. Eisman's cynicism is the result of his subsumption under the ideology of the masters, prefaced on a trauma-born reification of hopelessness and a reduction of agency to irredeemably morally corrupt "objective circumstances." To distinguish it from the Master Cynicism typified in this context by those who foresaw and guiltlessly profited from the crash, the cynicism of the masters, we can call Eisman's broken submission to the dominant and morally bankrupt ideology of the masters: Mastered Cynicism.

## MASTERED CYNICISM: ŽIŽEK AND
## THE UK RIOTS OF 2011

There is another variety of Mastered Cynicism, similarly seduced by the promise of gain and bowing to the authority of the masters, but unlike Eisman, *feigning* the reduction of its subjectivity to objective causes to exculpate disengagement with positive ideals and falsely thinks itself free. We can investigate this form of Mastered Cynicism through Slavoj Žižek's analysis of the UK riots of 2011. Using the analogy of the Jets courting Officer Krupke's sympathy in *West Side Story*, Žižek exposes the comfortably dishonest adherence to left-liberalism enjoyed by parasitic beneficiaries: "Our mothers all are junkies, our fathers all are drunks, golly Moses, naturally, we're punks."[46] Concerning the riots, Žižek argues that the liberal explanation—that they were reducible to a legitimate protest against injustice and inequality—was not just a lie, but a lie concealing an important truth. For Žižek, the riots were a crude expression of the consequences of interpellation with the dominant ideology—the tyranny of mammon, self-assertion, and materialism. In *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, Žižek said the following about the rioters:

> There was no ideological justification, they were totally caught in the dominant ideology, with no ways to realize what this ideology demands, it's a wild acting out within this ideological space of consumerism. Even if we are dealing with an apparently totally non-ideological brutality to burn houses, to get objects, it is the result of a very specific social and ideological constellation, where big ideology striving for justice, equality, etc. disintegrates.[47]

Per Žižek, the "liberal" explanation which the Mastered Cynic happily affirms, is a diversion tactic serving to downplay liberal guilt at the radical subjectivating effects of neo-liberal capitalism. By contrast, in the hopes of enjoying the riches the powerful may bestow, Mastered Cynics mimic the powerful as far as they can, excusing an abandonment of social responsibility by reducing their subjectivity to objective causes. However, by embracing the dominant ideology from a position of relative insignificance, Mastered Cynics are ideal subjects for the masters: angry, poor, and disenfranchised, but ultimately subservient to the dominant ideology which keeps them there. Paradoxically this reinforces the claim that the Mastered Cynical agency is indeed reducible to external forces, becoming what it pretends to be. While thinking itself free, this Mastered Cynicism is the product of externally compelled self-subjugation.[48]

## CONCLUSION

Master Cynicism is uninhibited by guilt, fear, or pain, it is more successfully post-idealistic than Liberal Cynicism and takes advantage of ideals, naiveté, ideology, and cynicism in the pursuit of power. This account suggests that it is beyond any form of suffering and ideals and therefore, unlike Liberal Cynicism, beyond critique, but this is too hasty. Master Cynicism is brittle, hostile, insatiable in its pursuit of power, narcissistic, megalomaniacal, and reduces to a morality trumping desire for domination over others. Much like Liberal Cynicism, this condition belies persistent investment but the investment here is autonomy and power. The Master Cynic represses an inchoate skepticism about autonomy, which manifests in a manic and irrational pursuit of domination. Consequently, the Master Cynic preemptively and aggressively disavows any reminder of the repression. This explains the refusal of social responsibility, ethics, virtue, morality, compassion, sympathy, empathy, duty, and so forth, which we have seen in every instantiation of Master Cynicism. This also explains Master Cynicism's megalomania, its insatiable hunger for money and power, as well as the tendency toward patriarchy, misogyny, sexual misconduct, and violence. All of which are manifestations of a panicked refusal of the obstacles to its idealized vision of autonomy. This also suggests an explanation as to how and why Master Cynicism is associated with the pursuit of vast wealth, celebrity, influence, fame, power, and so forth, and why the lust for them is insatiable. Denying the limits to freedom posed by respecting the other, or by appreciating independence, relationships, vulnerability, fallibility, and so forth, enables the Master Cynic to maintain the fantasy of idealized autonomy. However, since no amount of power can eradicate the inchoate fear that total freedom is impossible, the will to dominate—to acquire wealth, fame, and power—persists indefinitely.

Like Extreme Liberal Cynicism, this internal structure may too pose the possibility of a transformative critique. If Master Cynicism can be exposed as prefaced on denial, it may be contested. The more formidable task for Master Cynicism is bringing about the motivation for a self-overcoming. For, unlike Extreme Liberal Cynicism, if Master Cynicism can feed its addiction enough to avoid a reckoning, then its suffering would be less than the mature Liberal Cynic, and therefore it would be less inclined to seek an escape. Possible means to encourage openness to critique would be to highlight the insatiability, mania, and panic associated with this incessant and impossible pursuit.

For Mastered Cynicism, there is perhaps more reason for optimism. Concerning the Lucians of the world, a reanimation of Kynical virtues such as the will-to-truth, autarky, and uniting word and deed could compel relinquishing the neurotic hate for idealists (we will return to this idea in chapter 5).

Concerning the Mastered Cynics traumatized into reifying hopelessness via a reduction of agency to objective circumstance, the painful powerlessness could urge a reconception of its reification (we will return to this idea in chapters 5 and 6). Concerning the "poor megalomaniacs," exculpating themselves from the barriers to domination via feigning the reduction of their agency to objective causes, there are at least two avenues for transformation. The first is that they are unlikely to succeed in achieving anything ever remotely resembling the entitlements of the Masters, a "failure" which could compel a critique of the dominant forces of interpellation. The second is that the unhealthy situations where the cultural command to dominate manifests, for example, in cycles of psychological and material violence, abuse, manipulation, betrayal, and so forth, could leave the Mastered Cynic susceptible to critiques revealing that its pursuit of autonomy and idolizing mimicry of the powerful subordinates rather than frees itself. Detailing this potential for transformation latent within Mastered Cynicism is a project for another time. For now, we are primarily interested in the relationship between Liberal and Master Cynicism. Buying into enlightenment critique, superstructural theory, and false consciousness, Master Cynicism manipulates this enlightenment in the pursuit of power. Once Liberal Cynicism reaches extremes it is susceptible to Master Cynical seductions offering to assuage confusion, guilt, and fear. This is to say, Extreme Liberal Cynicism, which buys into the reduction of its own consciousness to deluded epiphenomena within power not only enables Master Cynicism but risks being mastered by it.

## NOTES

1. W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming," in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1956).

2. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987). The term "Master Cynicism" was first used by Alan Keenan, "The Twilight of the Political? A Contribution to the Democratic Critique of Cynicism," *Theory & Event* 2, no. 1 (1998). This was adopted by William Chaloupka and David Mazella. The moves in this chapter benefit from Keenan's tripartite distinction between (1) the power-wielding "master cynic" (2) the "cynical insider" who benefits from their participation, and (3) the "outsider" whose cynicism stems from powerlessness. This roughly fits onto my distinction of Master, Mastered, and Extreme Liberal Cynicism. Per Keenan, "Insider cynicism" mimics the powerful due to a mixture of fear of economic precariousness and hopes to enjoy the riches the powerful may bestow upon them, this is one variety of what we are calling "Mastered Cynicism." The "cynical outsiders" are victim to the whims of the powerful and succumb to an apathetic resignation upon realizing their status. While Keenan, Chaloupka, and Mazella's taxonomy favors a distinction between the culpability of the rulers and the petit bourgeoisie

in contrast to the victimhood of the proletariat, my presentation of Mastered Cynicism contains the possibility of comparable culpability across these divides.

3. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 20.

4. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 87. Sloterdijk does not refer to master cynicism as a distinct variety, just an expression of the ubiquitous cynicism by the powerful, hence master's not master cynicism.

5. Keenan, "The Twilight of the Political?"

6. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, trans. David Luke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

7. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 364.

8. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 175.

9. Frank Capra, dir., *It's a Wonderful Life*, perf. James Stewart, Donna Reed, and Lionel Barrymore (Los Angeles: RKO, 1946).

10. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*.

11. Marquise De Sade, *Philosophy in the Boudoir, Or, The Immoral Mentors*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Penguin, 2006).

12. Marquise De Sade, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, 104–49.

13. Marquise De Sade, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, 105.

14. Marquise De Sade, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, 34.

15. Marquise De Sade, *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, 134.

16. Louisa Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

17. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Grand Inquisitor: With Related Chapters from the Brothers Karamazov*, ed. Charles B. Guigno, trans. Constance Garnett (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1993).

18. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 182.

19. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 78.

20. David Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 224.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Modern Library, 1929), 304.

24. Ibid.

25. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Peter E. Bondanella (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

26. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 32.

27. Although brought to fruition in institutionalized religion, Sloterdijk locates contemporary Master Cynicism's apotheosis in the cleavage of church and state, the revolutionary years from French republicanism to Soviet communism, in the hands of ideologies exploiting the ideals behind those movements: "the more malicious aspects of the illusion of freedom are those beliefs the rulers are happy to see in the people who commit to austerities out of ideological commitment, while their leaders enjoy all they can—only those who lived before the revolution, or stay at its head, get the taste of the sweetness of life," ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 45.

31. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 29–30, quoting from *The Three Penny Opera*. Bertolt Brecht, *The Three Penny Opera*, trans. Desmond Vesey and Eric Bentley (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1964).

32. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 243.

33. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 211, note 17.

34. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row 2008).

35. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 87.

36. "After the 'disintegration of values,' . . . where 'good' and 'evil' dispatch each other into the 'beyond' such a critical 'reflection' on 'authentic being' become possible." Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 89.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Rises* helps highlight the spectrum of comportments between moderate and extreme liberal as well as helping to define Master Cynicism. An example of a Master Cynic from the Dark Knight trilogy is one of the main antagonists, Bane. Bane's candidacy amounts to his conscious exploitation of both naiveté and Liberal Cynicism for purely selfish aims. Bane's comfortable disinhibited duplicity and appeal to naïveté and cynicism can be seen in the "undue" process of his public courts; a strategic attempt to inoculate his tyrannical rule against protest under the guise of transparency, accountability, and equal distribution of juridical power. The appeal can be seen in Bane's speeches at a football stadium and outside a prison, where he excites naïve cynical liberalism into the basest revolutionary zeal to stir up the violence that would justify his damnation of humanity: "We come here not as conquerors, but as liberators to return control of this city to the people. Tomorrow you claim what is rightfully yours." Christopher Nolan, dir., *The Dark Knight Rises* (New York: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2012).

A Trump for Liberal Cynics, Bane feeds on the cynical consolation—the belief that all humanity is corrupt—exciting indignation as a smokescreen for manipulation. Bane appeals to those who refuse to recognize the subtlety of the contemporary situation, and hunger for a simple leader with a simple narrative, which will cover the many-sidedness of truth and the existential discomfort which the pluralism on which cohabitation depends can induce. Bane willfully and adroitly exploits many features of an essentially self-assertive "slave" morality; the non-self-implicating condemnation of privilege and a repressed egoistic desire for dominance dangerously clothed in the (self) righteous indignation where egoistic vengeance and retribution are transfigured as justified violence, aspects of ideological blindness whereby individuals so frustrated with a "system" overlook the atrocious deficiencies in the proposed alternatives: symbolizing the politics of negativity and hate that have so marred contemporary American and European politics:

Harvey Dent was held up to you as a shining example of justice. You have been supplied with a false idol, a straw man, to placate, to stop you tearing down this corrupt city. . . . We take Gotham from the corrupt, the rich. The oppressors of generations who've kept you down with the myth of opportunity. And we give it back to you, the people. Gotham is yours, none shall interfere. Do as you please. But start by storming Blackgate and freeing the oppressed! . . . Step forward, those who would serve, for an army will be raised. The powerful will be ripped from their decadent nests and cast into the cold world the rest of us have known and endured. Courts will be convened. Spoils will be enjoyed. Blood will be shed. (Nolan, *The Dark Knight Rises*)

What marks Bane's attitude as definitive of Master Cynicism is that there is no ideology beneath this appeal and no ideology to which he will not appeal. There is no desire to include the people of Gotham in the elite he represents, indeed they are to be killed, and whatever ideology it suits them to project in order to seduce the people into subservience, they will utilize, be it socialism, communism, libertarianism, justice, etc., etc. Master Cynicism then is the pure pursuit of power under the auspices of an "enlightened" post-ideological consciousness.

40. Lucien De Samosate, "The Passing Of Peregrinus." *Lucian*, trans. A. M. Harmon (London: William Heinemann, 1962); Sloterdijk's analysis, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 169–174.

41. Lucien De Samosate, "The Passing Of Peregrinus"; Sloterdijk's analysis, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 171.

42. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 174.

43. Adam McKay, dir., *The Big Short* (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 2015).

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins, dirs., *West Side Story* (Los Angeles: United Artists, 1961).

47. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=238&v=9TB52h6c2Ts. Standard YouTube license.

48. That the rioters included those exculpating themselves via functionalistic reductions of their own subjectivity can be laid out in two examples. Firstly, the infamous incident during the riots when two men robbed a Malaysian student who had been attacked and had his jaw broken by other rioters. Feigning sympathy, they offered to help the bleeding victim to his feet. But this was not a moment of tenderness amid the waves of violence, for as the dazed young man staggered to his feet, the apparent good Samaritans leaned in, opened his rucksack, and took his belongings. The victim was 20-year-old Malaysian student Ashraf Hazier Rossli. His first attacker, Beau Isagba, 17, broke his jaw in two places and stole his bicycle. As he sat dazed and in a pool of blood, Reece Donovan, 22, and John Kafunda, 22, took his mobile phone, wallet, games console, and games. Although caught red-handed on CCTV, Donovan and Kafunda denied wrongdoing; Kafunda told police he was "a million percent sure" he was not the man in the film, and that "If that was me I would physically stop them but that isn't me there." These individuals represent an ignorant, self-assertive, materialistic portion of the rioters, using liberal sympathy with institutional racism to justify violent materialism. This feigning of liberalism is different from the "Trump-est"

of Tea-Partiers only in that they don't have a membership to the clubhouse. And, just as fascism unites rulers with the proletariat, Master Cynicism unites those whose ignorance is so disastrous that it blurs the distinction between stupidity and malice with those who revel in it. Of course, this extreme example represents a minority who have succumbed to the seductions of Master Cynicism, among a larger minority benefiting from and participating uncritically in its perpetuation. Their conformity to the worst vision of human nature must in some part be the result of the dominance of the Master Cynical late capitalist ideology, an obstacle to those who remain practically invested in liberalism and who still occupy a large portion of society. Kafunda and Donovan were convicted of robbery and violent disorder and Isagba of grievous bodily harm and theft. Mr. Rossli was taken to the Royal London Hospital for treatment for his injuries (various sources incl. BBC News, *The Guardian*).

# Part 1

## *Conclusion*

As Enlightened False Consciousness, cynicism concludes that ideology is transcendental and false. The Cynical Liberal consciously resigns to the impossibility of liberalism while unconsciously maintaining allegiance to capitalism. Enlightened False Consciousness is rare, Cynical Liberalism is hardly ubiquitous, and neither does full justice to our literary phenomenology of familiar cynicisms. Jess Row misdiagnoses as collective what is a provincial variety: the cynicism of art house Hollywood is not, as Row claims "everywhere in American culture,"[1] and even the Liberal Cynicism we extracted from these analyses is more of a luxury than a pandemic. Nevertheless, it finds footing in academia and liberal culture. This Liberal Cynicism shares Enlightened False Consciousness' familiarity with ideology critique which targeted forces opposed to equality, justice, nonviolence, and freedom. However, by contrast, Liberal Cynicism remains genuinely invested, pained by the perceived failures of liberalism, and through resignation and inertia enables the problems that compel it. This fraught relationship can result in an extreme variety which, while highly critical of ideals and ideology, commits Inauthentic Ideology Critique, either as a refusal or inability to acknowledge its dependency on ideals or through reifying their inefficacy. In either form Liberal Cynicism effectively abandons its constitutive ideals and suffers for it. In an unsuccessful attempt to overcome this pain, Extreme Liberal Cynicism represses its constitutive ideals by fantasizing the impossibility of what it desires. Extreme Liberal Cynicism is rationally unjustifiable when it fails to acknowledge its own idealism, when it absolutizes and reifies the inefficacy of its constitutive idealism, and when it refuses to engage in the same degree of critique it relishes applying elsewhere. It is intrinsically harmful because it hurts. It is instrumentally harmful in virtue of enabling the problems that compel it. This enablement can be seen in that while criticizing injustice, and so forth, within liberal capitalism, on the level of action, the Extreme Cynic participates in the system it bemoans, and through ritualized practical reinforcement and absolutizing narrative performatively

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reifies the illusion of its necessity. Extreme Liberal Cynicism is also instrumentally harmful because it is both ill-equipped to oppose, and vulnerable to succumbing to, Mastered Cynicism. Crucially, since Liberal Cynicism's exaggerated pessimism belies a persistent idealism, it remains open to a more productive response. To begin developing this response and to contextualize this problem in the context of contemporary philosophy, in part 2 we must indulge a considerable digression into the works of contemporary philosopher Judith Butler.

## NOTE

1. Jess Row, "American Cynicism and Its Cure," *Boston Review*, May, 18, 2015, https://bostonreview.net/articles/jess-row-american-cynicism/.

# PART 2

# Judith Butler and Extreme Liberal Cynicism

# Part 2

## *Introduction*

Judith Butler's work is relatively representative of popular trends in the theoretical humanities, especially those indebted to both continental philosophy and progressive liberal politics. This is the corner of academic culture that is prone to Extreme Liberal Cynicism. The purpose of focusing on Butler is that while taken as a whole, their work does not exemplify Liberal Cynicism, features of their "middle period" mark a "liberal-cynical" moment overcome in the later work. For this book, we are classifying Butler's work in three phases based on their thematic differences which map onto general preoccupations during works published in certain time frames. "Early" Butler refers to the work that focuses on the performativity of gender and materialization and spans from 1987 to 1990. The "middle phase" which focuses on the psychic machinations which prefigure performativity and materialization runs from "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in 1991, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* 1993, and culminates with *The Psychic Life of Power* in 1997. The "later phase" runs from 2001 onwards. I will also refer to the early and middle phase collectively under the designation pre-9/11, and the later work as post-9/11 as this period marks the most significant change of focus in Butler's career thus far. Part 3 argues that this later work provides resources for theorizing a heuristic for overcoming Extreme Liberal Cynicism more generally. The purpose of part 2 is to ground this later move. To this end, chapter 3 explains why we might consider Butler invested in liberal ideals at all, and chapter 4 argues that key texts in "middle" Butler bear resemblances to features of Extreme Liberal Cynicism, specifically Inauthentic Ideology Critique, Cynicalization, and Cruel Optimism.

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*Chapter 3*

# Judith Butler and Liberalism

The arguments in this chapter take Judith Butler's work as invested in ideals familiar to the intentionally broad conception of liberalism adopted in this book; specifically equality, tolerance, human rights, justice, democracy, freedom, and nonviolence. It is therefore crucial at the outset to address Butler's opposition to classic liberalism as well as objections to their work from within that paradigm.

## BUTLER'S ANTI-LIBERALISM

Butler is a consistent critic of individualism and autonomy as naively optimistic.[1] Butler resists liberal individualism, questions the tradition of locating rights within the individual, and critiques the liberal ontology which they argue pervades the legal framework in Western democracies.[2] Butler goes as far as rejecting the conception of rationality as hegemonic and the liberal idea of freedom as complicit in hatred and abjection.[3] Given this criticism, we must explain why to propose thinking of Butler as invested in liberal ideals. My claim is not that Butler's work is liberal in the classical sense, it is rather that in their later works, as well as reappropriating autonomy, individual rights, bodily integrity, and self-determination, Butler redefines and upholds the classic liberal ideals of justice, freedom, and equality such that they stand up to seminal criticisms from within post-structuralism. We can begin to ground this claim by rebutting a classic criticism charging Butler with abandoning these paradigmatic liberal enlightenment ideals. If we can show Butler's work to withstand this objection, we have gone some way to justify our reading. After this, we can outline further reasons to identify Butler's work as committed to equality, tolerance, human rights, justice, democracy, freedom, and nonviolence.

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## ILLIBERALISM IN BUTLER:
## NUSSBAUM CONTRA BUTLER

In "The Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler,"[4] Martha Nussbaum charged Butler with breaking from the liberal tradition. Nussbaum worried that Butler reduces freedom to an illusion by deconstructing and rejecting pre-cultural agency and a biologically/ontologically robust notion of sex. For Nussbaum, these moves amount to unwarranted metaphysical speculations incompatible with any meaningful conception of freedom and which disinherit the commitment to nonviolence, human rights, and equality. Per Nussbaum, this abandonment both stands Butler's feminist theory apart from its predecessors and renders it inert. Nussbaum argues that the denial of autonomous agency and the possibility of an objective ontology of sex are obstacles in the path of liberatory feminism because critiquing the category of sex problematizes the emancipation of women, and critiquing autonomous agency leaves us powerless in response to social and political problems both on the level of defining injustice and for activism aimed at contesting it. For example, it might be argued that the fight against female genital mutilation requires notions of biological integrity, individual autonomy, self-determination, and the individual's right to sexual pleasure, and therefore an account of the unconstructed ontological reality of "femaleness" is required to ground an internationally applicable justification for outlawing this cruel custom. Another case could be the fight for women's right to education. In line with Nussbaum's worry, we might argue that the fight for female education requires the notion of an inherent moral dignity realized through the achievement of autonomy. In Nussbaum's view, the realization and experience of autonomy and dignity require education, thus upholding individual autonomy is necessary for providing an argumentative platform to settle disputes over, or rationally asserting, women's right to education.

Concerning the grounds of Nussbaum's worry, we have already seen Butler's antipathy to classic liberal accounts of autonomy, and the idea of sex as inseparable from the constructed category of gender is indeed a key Butlerian theme. For example, in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* Butler argues that sex and gender are conceptually inseparable[5] and, that both are better understood as fictions than ontological realities.[6] That Nussbaum's worry is a valid one is further evidenced by Butler's arguments in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," first, that feminist discourse harmfully universalizes a provincial definition of what female means,[7] and second, that there is nothing unique about being female that needs to be expressed.[8]

Nussbaum claims that this deconstruction of sex is tethered to a narcissistic and anti-social individualism that is increasingly definitive of contemporary America. Support for this objection comes if we consider Butler's theory of the generation of sexual desire in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" where Butler writes: "It is precisely pleasure produced by the instability of those categories, namely gay and lesbian, which sustains the various erotic practices that make me a candidate for the category to begin with."[9] The suggestion seems to be that homosexual desire is heightened by its taboo of status, which is to say, the desirability of homosexual erotic practices, at least in part, derives from the fact that such desires fall outside the dominant regulative heteronormative paradigm. This argument is possibly a candidate for the kind of feature within Butler's theories that Nussbaum suggests is narcissistic. Nussbaum's argument may run along the lines of the claim that Butler universalizes a general explanatory model from their sexuality, evidencing a narcissistic preoccupation with subjective inclination.

A more troubling suggestion that follows from this objection, is a lack of moral concern for others within Butler's theory of performative subversion. This objection argues that Butler prescribes forms of subversive or nonconformist behavior which they are privileged to enjoy without immediate risk to their life, but which for many, would be extremely dangerous, if not lethally so. While Butler's claims both that norms require repetition to gain credence and that pleasures can be derived from nonconformity are surely true, there are those for whom that kind of discourse between subversion and pleasure seem highly indulgent, and in some cases simply offensive. Putting aside the very real concern that normative subversion is, for many, not a choice, it is surely a culturally specific and highly privileged subject who is safe to derive pleasure from poking fun at norms.

Per Nussbaum, the germination of generalized philosophical theory in personal experiences reflects unthinking conformity to an epoch defined by self-assertion, anti-solidarity, and a cynicism parasitic on liberalism. A point where we might be sympathetic to this accusation of anti-solidarity may be Butler's reticence concerning collective identification. For example, in "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'" Butler writes that "the very category, the subject, the 'we' that is supposed to be presumed for the purpose of solidarity, produces the very factionalization it is supposed to quell."[10] In her objection to this alleged anti-solidarity, Nussbaum concludes that Butler represents an increasingly dominant strain in feminism that forgoes solidarity for individualistic narratives of personal growth and self-expression.[11]

Nussbaum also argues that in the absence of any clearly defined theory of justice or the good, the subversion of identity categories and binary value distinctions can be extended to dissolve dichotomies such as just and unjust,

cruel and kind, violent and nonviolent, and so forth. On this argument, since Butler offers nothing by way of argumentative recourse to distinguish between beneficial and harmful subversion, they promote a line of thought whereby atrocities become theoretically permissible. Making this objection crystal clear, Nussbaum writes "You cannot simply resist as you please, for there are norms of fairness, decency, and dignity that entail that this is bad behavior. But then we have to articulate those norms—and this Butler refuses to do."[12]

Finally, Nussbaum worries that Butler ignores the empowering effects of sexual identification and reduces the process of gender identification and sexual "liberation" to a "necessary re-imprisonment under delimiting categories."[13] Support for such a reading is not too hard to find in Butler: "sex is retroactively installed at a pre-linguistic site to which there is no direct access . . . a fiction . . . within whose necessities we live, without which life itself would be unlivable [and which] constitutes the very terrain of cultural intelligibility."[14] For these reasons, Nussbaum reduces Butler's theories to an "ironic hopefulness":[15] a hopeless hope, defined not by actuality but by possibility, and one which has effectively disinherited liberal values.[16]

## A REPLY TO NUSSBAUM

A general response comes from the fact that Nussbaum veers close to a universalism which swims against a current where the standards from which to prescribe ethics have been called into question both by the extension of the Enlightenment's suspiciously critical eye to itself and the effects of opening up the theoretical humanities to underrepresented perspectives. This opening up brought with it the dawning realization that the liberal enlightenment's vision of rational utopia universalized a provincial value system complicit with colonial and imperial violence and oppression. Considering its sensitivity to this legacy, Butler's work and its popularity may reflect a degree of timeliness absent in Nussbaum. But of course, timeliness is not a defense in itself. To Nussbaum's more specific criticisms, firstly, the charge that Butler's feminism swaps equality, justice, human rights, solidarity, and freedom for a narcissistic individualism ignores both the radical sociality which performativity entails, the communal role of the punitive socio-normative policing it resists, and the collective commitment required for overcoming it. Concerning narcissistic individualism, a feature of Nussbaum's objection alleges a fetishization of taboo in Butler's work. In response, first, one would be hard-pressed to find accounts of sexual pleasure that deny the erotic appeal of the prohibited, or compelling cases against the rationale of a system that publicly prohibits privately permitted taboos. Second, regarding Nussbaum's

claim that Butler fetishizes subversion to the extent that it reinforces that which it subverts, this accusation can be problematized with reference to the numerous instances where Butler outlines specific sociopolitical and ethical reasons to subvert gender. For example, Butler writes in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination": "there is a political imperative to use these necessary errors or category mistakes . . . to rally and represent an oppressed political constituency."[17] Moreover, Nussbaum's objection also runs up against Butler's repeated efforts to restrict their defense of subversion to the pursuit of a more inclusive, less violent future for all, and where Butler explicitly warns against the distraction erotic pleasure may pose for the pursuit of this political desideratum. For example, Butler warns against the reinforcement of harmful norms in the adoption of "femme" categories which fetishize dependency[18] and, speaking on the pleasure associated with a lesbian identifying as a butch female, Butler argues that erotic role-playing wherein the roles traditionally given to men as the provider of financial, psychical, and emotional support are assumed risks reinforcing oppressive gender ideals by valorizing female self-sacrifice. The danger is that such performances resemble one of the most pernicious features of patriarchal heteronormativity: the sacrifice of female civic-political and self-constitutive agency. It seems clear from these examples, and the body of work they draw from, that, contrary to Nussbaum, Butler does not fetishize subversion.

Also contrary to Nussbaum's claims, there is a radical notion of solidarity sought after and defended in Butler, specifically in the co-constitution of identity. The notion within Butler's theory of performativity that every radically interdependent action constitutes our shared normativity prioritizes calls for deep reflection on our shared obligations, is inconsistent with Nussbaum's claims of an antisocial individualism. Further grounds to counter Nussbaum's anti-solidarity charge can be found in "Against Proper Objects,"[19] where Butler deconstructs the sex/gender categories at play in certain portions of race theory, feminism, and queer theory, exposing their complicity in restricting sex to the purview of queer theory and gender to feminism, categorizations that problematize the production of a coherent account of their mutuality and shared goals and which have fueled hostility and defensiveness between disciplines purportedly united in support of civil rights and social justice:

> There can be no viable feminism that fails to account for its complicity in forms of oppression, whether they be colonial, class-based, racist, or homophobic. And there can be no viable lesbian and gay studies paradigm that does not examine its own complicitous investments in misogyny and other forms of oppression. . . . I mean to open up another possibility for feminist thought, one that would overcome its complicity in heterosexist presuppositions, and mark an alliance with lesbian and gay struggles.[20]

Concerning the alleged denial of pre-cultural ontological/biological sex and/ or gender, Nussbaum's reading of Butler's ontology is not close enough. Butler does not deny the role of a given corporality and their epistemological refrain that access to the real is necessarily mediated by discourse is far from a linguistic idealist position. The following quote from *Bodies that Matter* makes this clear: "To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates causes or exhaustively composes that which it concedes, rather it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same a further formation of that body."[21] In an interview with Irene Costera Meijer and Baukje Prins, Butler is very clear on this point:

> Just as no prior materiality is accessible without the means of discourse, so no discourse can ever capture that prior materiality; to claim that the body is an elusive referent is not the same as claiming that it is only and always constructed. In some ways, it is precisely to claim that there is a limit to constructedness, a place, as it were, where construction necessarily meets its limit.[22]

Concerning Butler's resistance to uncritically accepting identity labels such as "lesbian" or "woman," far from betraying women, Butler warns that without attesting to the socio-historical genealogy of the category in question, we heighten the risk that acts of intended emancipation may unwittingly enforce restrictive normative ideals. Butler simply asks if we haven't worked out how we are "doing" gender, then how can we be sure that the idea of womanhood we are promoting isn't also delimiting the concept in a way that is to the detriment of actual women? Just as defining femaleness as reproductive capacity is anti-feminist, any final ontology of the woman closes itself off to representing all women. Butler's consideration of underrepresented embodiments represents a radically democratic, compassionate, and anticolonial aspiration, both firmly in line with the liberal tradition Nussbaum charges Butler with abandoning, and at the center of feminism in all its waves.

Moreover, Butler both explicitly endorses the strategic employment of identity categories and utilizes the critique of categories in the pursuit of achieving greater inclusivity and solidarity. Concerning the strategic employment of identity categories, at the beginning of their career, conceding that lobbying, demonstrations, legislative efforts, and other forms of realizing positive social change require identity politics,[23] Butler claims that the argument about using classic liberal humanist terms and identity categories is "a quarrel that feminists must put to bed."[24] Moreover, Butler's critique of homogenizing ontologies of the female is clearly in service of expanding solidarity within feminism. For example when Butler explains how damaging the attempts to define womanhood have been for the project of feminism:

Every time that specificity is articulated, there is resistance and factionalization within the very constituency that is supposed to be unified by the articulation of its common element. In the 1980s the feminist "we" rightly came under attack by women of color who claimed that the "we" was invariably white, and that the "we" that was meant to solidify the movement was the very source of a painful factionalization. The effort to categorize the specificity of feminism through recourse to maternity, whether biological or social, produced a similar factionalization and even a disavowal of feminism altogether.[25]

Concerning utilizing the critique of categories in the pursuit of achieving greater inclusivity and solidarity, Butler warns that such strategic applications should be carried out with the utmost care, the reason given is that using even provisional definitions risks assuming the emancipation of some "true" femininity potentially perniciously exclusive of some "false" femininity and that this can be an obstacle to expanding the rights and freedoms of actual women. Therefore, Butler argues that it is perfectly reasonable for "frontline feminism" to use identity categories while avoiding prescribing the right thing to think of as "gender" "female," "sex," and so forth, all firmly in the service of optimally inclusive emancipation. Furthermore, Butler's refusal to sanction the unchecked strategic application of identity is not, as per Nussbaum, utilized to promote subversion for its own sake, far from it, it is operating in the egalitarian aspiration to resist reinforcing regulative ideals of gender, sexuality, and womanhood typical of oppressive regimes, a refusal which belies a consistent commitment to justice, equality, and freedom, the very ideals Nussbaum accuses Butler of jettisoning:

> Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds.[26]

In addition, this aspiration to expand "the cultural field" in the name of freedom may be a more realistic aspiration than many autonomy-based perspectives. This is because the assumption of an unmediated origin of self-determination is untenable and removes the responsibility and duty to consider the limiting effects certain sociopolitical and psycho-physical conditions place on agency, an omission which may blind us to the workings of oppression: "The recourse to a position, hypothetical, counterfactual, or imaginary, that places itself beyond the play of power, and which seeks to establish the meta-political basis for a negotiation of power relations, is perhaps the most insidious ruse of power."[27]

While critiquing the ontology and defending the strategic utility of rational autonomous agency, realizing and exercising a notion of freedom within

constraints is at the heart of Butler's work. Conceding that performativity shows us how gender restricts existential and psychic freedom, Butler also theorizes how this delimitation also empowers us.[28] Butler also explains that such deconstructions condition our understanding of the reality which the notion of a transparent autonomous agency cannot capture: "To recast the referent as the signified, and to authorize or safeguard the category of women as a site of possible resignifications is to expand the possibilities of what it means to be a woman and in this sense to condition and enable an enhanced sense of agency."[29]

Butler also argues that far from eliminating the political goals fought for in social justice movements, the conception of freedom understood as within the radical sociality of a post-structuralist frame contributes to mobilizing against oppression and persecution more effectively than identity category discourse: "If a deconstruction of the materiality of bodies suspends and problematizes the traditional ontological referent of the term, it does not freeze, banish, render useless, or deplete of meaning the usage of the term. On the contrary, it provides the conditions to mobilize the signifier in the service of an alternative."[30] Thus, not only does Butler avoid problematically assuming the epistemic power to capture identity from outside the context of social intelligibility, but their theories also explore the perimeters in which a viable and coherent notion of agency may be carved out. Despite Nussbaum's objection then, the question for Butler is not whether we have agency, but how agency is constructed, and where political agency emerges within an accurate picture of psychic, corporeal, and socio-cultural constraints:

> How can it be that the subject, taken to be the condition for, and instrument of, agency, is at the same time the effect of subordination, understood as the deprivation of agency? If subordination is the condition of possibility for agency, how might agency be thought in opposition to the forces of subordination?[31]

A theory capable of answering these questions is better equipped to deal with the insights of Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Levi-Strauss, Saussure, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida as well as Darwinism, physics, and neuroscience which have collectively and irreversibly problematized the liberal enlightenment notion of a free autonomous agency interjecting from outside the causal/material and social realms based on rational deliberation. But to look beyond this model is not to dismiss the tenets of liberalism, nor is denying autonomous agency to look for the determining forces that spell defeatism. To put it simply, accepting our vulnerability to forces constitutive of agency is requisite for discovering what agency is, and therefore what freedom, justice, and equality can, and should be:

We may be tempted to think that to assume the subject in advance is necessary in order to safeguard the agency of the subject, but to claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined, on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency.[32]

Agency is to be found, paradoxically, in the possibilities opened up in and by that constrained appropriation of the regulatory law, by the materialization of that law, the compulsory appropriation, and identification with those normative demands.[33]

Nussbaum's objection then, that Butler reduces freedom to an illusion and disinherits the commitment to nonviolence, justice, and equality are hard to square with Butler's aspirations. Indeed, Nussbaum's criticism assumes a metaphysically speculative insistence on an ahistorical rational autonomy, and that it is necessary for realizing nonviolence, justice, and equality, as well as imposing a universalized liberal conception of human rights. By contrast, Butler does not presuppose a metaphysic of the subject, of rights, or indeed of normativity, recognizing the dangers of doing so for the project of achieving freedom, justice, and equality. In chapter 4, we will return to the question as to whether Butler succeeds in championing these ideals.

## BUTLER'S LIBERALISM

Having addressed the major thrust of Nussbaum's arguments and taking the broad definition of liberal as invested in freedom, equality, justice, we can now turn to Butler's politicization of their own theories which, I argue, lends further credence to describing Butler's work as invested in liberal ideals, broadly conceived. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Butler sought to contest the pernicious effects of heteronormativity on marginalized forms of gender and sexual identification. Therein, Butler calls for envisaging of a future social world where the punitive consequences of gender insubordination are abated, and in which socially-set existential compartmental perimeters become wider and likelier to permit conventionally attacked embodiments greater freedoms and security,[34] and Butler has publicly associated with movements indebted to liberal humanism as their speech at an Occupy Wall Street rally suggests:

We object to the monopolization of wealth. We object to making working populations disposable. We object to the privatization of education. We believe that education must be a public good and a public value. We oppose the expanding numbers of the poor. We rage against the banks that push people from their homes, and the lack of health care for unfathomable numbers. We object to

economic racism and call for its end. . . . We are here, time and again, persisting, imagining the phrase, "we the people."[35]

Liberal political ideals also animate Butler's work on materialization: the means through which discursive regimes render the material of the body intelligible, thus normalizing and naturalizing contingent conceptions of the meaning of the body.[36] Per Butler, the normalizing and naturalization of a discursively realized figure has ethical, social, and political consequences because in labeling sex and sexuality "natural" it illegitimately attaches a pre-discursive origin to a necessarily post-discursive designation. Butler describes their work contesting this naturalization as oriented toward the egalitarian aspiration to secure greater freedom and security for nontraditional comportments, as well as everyone else.[37] In proposing a form of psychic resistance to normalization *The Psychic Life of Power* serves a similar aspiration.[38] Per Butler, exploiting the psychic excess within agency beyond the scope of delimiting intelligibility or possible embodiment marks the path toward a "more ethical kind of being."[39] In this way, *The Psychic Life of Power* can be viewed as working from this theory of the subject to mark out the psychic space for political freedom within constraints placed on subjectivation at the co-constitutive social/psychic levels. While the work on performativity included an analysis of the punishment dished out to those who deviate from the norms, *The Psychic Life of Power* theorizes its origination in the discourse of psychoanalysis, explaining how the heteronormative script is necessarily unsuccessfully realized and consequently perpetuates a panicked performance of dominant sex/gender norms, which compels the aggressive mistreatment of non-gender-sexual-conformity as the re-emergence of repressed libidinal investments. Because of these commitments to nonviolence, justice, equality, freedom, human rights, and protecting marginalized communities we can regard *The Psychic Life of Power* as collectible under the broad umbrella of liberalism.

## CONCLUSION

Reflection on a response to a famous criticism of Butler as anti-liberal alongside a survey of the normative aspirations animating Butler's career permit a qualified association of their work with ideals from within a broad conception of liberalism, specifically, equality, tolerance, human rights, justice, democracy, freedom, nonviolence. In chapter 4, we will now turn to the claim that "middle Butler," fails these guiding ideals.

## NOTES

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2. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (London: Verso, 2004), 25.

3. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 109.

4. Martha C. Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler," *The New Republic*, February 22, 1999, https://newrepublic.com/article/150687/professor-parody.

5. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519–31.

6. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 5.

7. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 523.

8. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 523.

9. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michelle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 308.

10. Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of the 'Postmodernism,'" in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (New York: Routledge, 1995), 14.

11. Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody."

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, introduction.

15. Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody."

16. Ibid.

17. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 18.

18. Ibid.

19. Judith Butler, "Against Proper Objects,"in *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, eds. Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 2.

20. Ibid.

21. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 10.

22. Irene Costera Meijer and Baukje Prins, "How Bodies Come to Matter: An Interview with Judith Butler" *Signs* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 278.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Butler, "Contingent Foundations," 15.

26. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 531.

27. Butler, "Contingent Foundations," 6.

28. Ibid.

29. Butler, "Contingent Foundations,"16.

30. Butler, "Contingent Foundations," 17.

31. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 10.

32. Butler, "Contingent Foundations," 12.

33. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 12.

34. Ibid.

35. Transcript made and published in a comment on http://feministing.com/2011/10/24/judith-butler-joins-occupy/ by username: William.

36. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 9.

37. Costera Meijer and Prins, "How Bodies Come To Matter," 277.

38. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 86

39. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 131.

# Judith Butler and
# Liberal Cynicism

As we argued in chapter 3, although Judith Butler is critical of rational autonomy, because of their commitments to nonviolence, democracy, justice, equality, freedom, and protecting marginalized communities we can, nevertheless, regard Butler's work as collectible under the broad umbrella of liberalism. We can now turn to the claim that despite these guiding ideals, "middle" Butler fails them. This includes the claim that middle Butler bears hallmarks analogous to Inauthentic Ideology Critique, Cynicalization, and Cruel Optimism as defined in chapter 1. While these analogous features lack the complex emotional elements of the embodied varieties, the structural similarities are telling, especially given that Butler represents the cutting edge of the tradition of ideology critique that Sloterdijk charges with culminating in Enlightened False Consciousness. Concerning Inauthentic Ideology Critique, middle Butler bears two crucial marks: first, reifying the inefficacy/abandoning the values on which it depends, and second, exhibiting a reluctance to admit to these values or even disavowing them. Concerning Cynicalization: middle Butler also evidences both features—the deepening of an inherited cynicism and simultaneously raising and prohibiting hope.

## INAUTHENTIC IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE
## AS ABANDONMENT

We can locate the inauthentic ideology critique as abandonment typical of Liberal Cynicism in Butler's middle work: specifically, that although Butler's work in this period remains allegiant to liberal ideals, in absolutizing their inefficacy, it effectively abandons them. The worry revolves around the notion of violence in the Butlerian framework. Although the idea of a normatively violent "othering" required for conscious subjectivity is not new within the

continental lineage, in Derrida, in the Levinasian frame, or Kristeva's psycho-analytic account of abjection, for example, normative violence is not political or ethical.[1] By contrast, Butler places epistemic, normative, symbolic, linguistic, concrete, and conscious hateful violence on a spectrum. For example, in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler claims that although "unreal," sex and gender are conditions for the possibility of conscious subjectivity.[2] In "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," Butler claims that even in the context of jubilant and liberating identifications and political gains for socially and institutionally marginalized sexualities, identity categories are both necessary and necessarily perpetuate the oppressive workings of hegemonic power.[3] Crucially, Butler claims that "this kind of categorization can be called a violent one, a forceful one,"[4] and that the "discursive ordering and production of bodies in accordance with the category of sex is itself a material violence."[5] In Butler's middle work then, material violence is nominated as a transcendental figure. The most troublesome aspect of this universalization is Butler's politicization of it.[6] The worry is not just that Butler is making a category mistake or being insufficiently sympathetic with victims of violence, it is rather that they render necessary a form of material normative violence operative in identitarian hate crime, and thus erects an insurmountable obstacle to achieving equal freedom and justice.

*The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) deepens this view. Therein, Butler develops Foucauldian subjectivation by theorizing the psychic processes which prefigure embodied performativity, appealing to a formal symmetry between Hegel's dialectic up to unhappy consciousness,[7] Nietzsche's notion of sublimation,[8] Freud's theories of narcissism and melancholia,[9] and Althusser's psycho-politics of interpellation.[10] This culminates in a picture of the psychic operations upon which subjectivity depends as passionately attached to self-inflicted normative violence and subordination compelling identitarian violence toward the other. We can extract from Butler's use of this formal symmetry, a picture of violence as necessary, unavoidable, and preconscious, adding to the violence of policed performativity and regulatory materialization theorized in Butler's earlier work. This culminates in a threefold model of necessary violence: first, the violence of identity formation—"the subject is initiated through a primary submission to power"; second, the violence of self against self—"the form this power takes is relentlessly marked by a figure of . . . turning on oneself";[11] and third, the violence of self against other—"the melancholic aggression and the desire to vanquish . . . characterizes the public response to the death of many of those considered 'socially dead,' who die from AIDS . . . Gay people, prostitutes, drug users, among others."[12]

Crucially, this threefold violence germinates prior to conscious agency,[13] such that Butler concludes that "the subject's vulnerability to violence is unavoidable."[14] While in Butler's earlier work, subversive performance can

contest oppressive norms, here Butler transcendentalizes the violence at play in the psychic formation of the subject such that oppressive violence is necessarily beyond the reach of conscious agency. This reification of necessary pre-performative violence suits our definition of Extreme Liberal Cynicism's effectively disavowing the efficacy of liberal ideals while at the same time valuing them, in this case, nonviolence. For while Butler's work is invested in contesting violence, in theorizing its absolute necessity, it leaves us incapable of doing so.

## INAUTHENTIC IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE
## AS A FAILED AVOWAL

We have seen how Butler can be reasonably described as invested in liberal ideals/commitments, broadly construed. As well as providing more evidence for this, we can also suggest that Butler refuses to avow these ideals by focusing on a key tension in *Bodies That Matter*, specifically, Butler's theory of materialization: the mechanism through which discursive regimes render the material of the body intelligible. The following quote lays out the problem:

> The exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet subjects but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those unlivable and uninhabitable zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject.[15]

The tension revolves around what we are supposed to think of abjection and abject beings who are "not yet subjects" but inhabit social life, and what to make of Butler's politicization of this theory. The problem can be put in the form of the question: Is Butler talking of hypothetical beings beyond intelligibility, perhaps potential future materialized embodiments, or actual people struggling for recognition and acceptance within dominant social norms? The attempt to answer this question can compel three readings, the "transcendental," "existential," and "Kynical." What we mean here by existential here relates to Kierkegaard, for whom the existentially existing individual is a subject who has self-actualized through a passionate commitment to a chosen set of subjective truths: principles by which to live, and die. The idea we are adopting in qualified form here is that we are not born human in the full sense of what that means, that rather, our humanity is bestowed on us by a community and through discourse, and relates to our perceived moral worth rather than existence in an ontological sense. What we mean here by

transcendental refers to the Foucauldian de-universalized Kantian view that experience depends on the historically contingent a priori. The transcendental reading has the abject as beyond intelligibility. What we mean by Kynical is that Butler should be read as consciously flaunting the organizing principles of language, reason, and truth, as per the Greek tradition spearheaded by Diogenes. My thesis is that these heuristics are reasonable responses to independent and ultimately inconsistent moves within a simultaneously phenomenological, metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, political framework subordinate to a straightforward but concealed principled commitment to justice, equality, freedom, and nonviolence. This is not to claim that Butler is wrong or misguided, far from it, it is rather to suggest that there is a stronger normative position here than Butler's theory can allow and that this concealment is due to a fraught relationship between ideals and critique which, as we have seen, is a hallmark of Liberal Cynicism.

On the existential reading, Butler is critiquing the discourses which normatively erect and sustain the perimeters delimiting which humans are deemed worthy of dignity and respect. Abjection here refers to individuals denied the treatment that participation in the category of human should entail. The existential reading has Butler aiming to contest the mechanisms through which the loss of human lives can appear more or less grievable, to use Butler's term, due to explicit and implicit cultural biases, normative and concrete discrimination, prejudice, ignorance, unthinking conformity, explicit hatred, and so forth. There are many instances where Butler seems to endorse this reading. For example, in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler cites psychosis as one of the consequences of abjection,[16] and refers to abject beings as failing to qualify as "fully human."[17] More support for the existential reading comes when Butler gives examples of the abject as women, lesbians,[18] refugees, "the Arab," AIDS victims, alleged terrorists, portions of the Muslamina, and Guantanamo detainees. Connecting abjection with mental conditions, qualifications for moral concern, and examples of specific demographics in this way suggests that we are talking about actual mistreated humans and the existential notion of humanity as "enjoyed" in degrees. Such a view is exemplified in *Bodies That Matter* where Butler explains that for abjected beings their humanity is questionable.[19] As well as making sense of these passages, the existential reading allows us to make good sense of how Butler politicizes the processes of identity formation, materialization, and performativity. On this view, the humanity that comes into question is to be understood as within the purview of a conscious, exclusive, and regulative normativity, and would therefore be exposable and revisable from within this domain. Unfortunately, Butler distances themself from the existential reading.[20] This distancing, most likely, stems from the desire to avoid simplifying and superficializing the depth of discursive construction, as well as avoiding the naiveté of

assumptions potentially guiding the existential reading. Such naiveté might include overlooking the inaccessibility to reflexive self-consciousness of the internalization of norms through discourse and performative reinforcement: problematizing the assumption that the contestation of abjection is a task of conscious reclassification. This reading is in line with Butler's persistent refusal of classical liberal humanist formulations as naïve forms of political optimism. Per Butler, the point missed on the liberal humanist model is that the discursive realized perimeters of intelligibility which dictate whose lives matter, as well as the freedom to contest this regulatory normativity, operate within the perimeters dictated by normative violence and are therefore within that which Butler seeks to contest. On this view, the existential reading assumes the impossible: a purview beyond discursivity.

The transcendental reading may avoid this problem, upon which abjection occurs where the discursively initiated psychic internalization of norms influences the cognitive and perceptual apparatuses which render humanity intelligible and restricts certain possibilities to unintelligibility. In this reading, Butler is critiquing the discourses which normatively erect and sustain what counts as human: a preconscious discursively realized psychic/cognitive function responsible for the possibility of experiencing sensory input as human.[21] There is considerable support for reading Butler this way:

> To be called unreal and have, as it were, institutionalized a form of differential treatment, is to become the other against whom (or against which) the human is made. It is the inhuman, the beyond the human, the less than human, the border that secures the human in its ostensible reality, to be called a copy to be called unreal is one way to be oppressed, but consider that it is more fundamental than that, to be oppressed means that you already exist as a subject of some kind, you are there as the visible and oppressed other for the master subject, as a possible or potential subject, but to be unreal is to be something else again. To be oppressed you must first become intelligible. To find that you are fundamentally unintelligible indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find you to be an impossibility, is to find that you have not achieved access to the human, to find yourself speaking only and always as if you were human, but with the sense that you are not, to find that your language is hollow, that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in your favor.[22]

Further support for the transcendental reading comes from an interview with Irene Costera Meijer and Baukje Prins, where Butler asks how subjects count or qualify as real and answers that popular discourse produces "domains of unthinkability."[23] Moreover, in *Bodies That Matter*, Butler claims that bodies are only intelligible within the constraints of regulatory schema[24] and describes this abjection as necessary for the perception of subjectivity.[25]

Moreover, Butler describes the regulatory normativity which dictates the conditions of intelligibility as an instrument of power instrumentalized for purposes of hierarchy, subordination, and exclusion. This politicization is harder to defend on the transcendental than on the existential reading because here the claim is that certain persons occupy realms outside any current possible understanding of personhood. But this could not be mobilized for defending subjugated groups because their intelligibility is surely required for both their mistreatment and its contestation. The problem can be made clearer by asking: If it is true that sex and gender are transcendental conditions for intelligibility as a human does this mean the abjected are imperceptible? On the transcendental reading, the answer would be yes. This is hugely problematic, for even while some struggle to understand or empathize with certain identifications, even to the extent of denying their moral or even human status, such cases of dehumanization require the recognition of a *would-be-human*. Put simply, only a human can be dehumanized.

A potential way to address this issue is to read Butler's work as aiming to produce a future in which subjects come to occupy a less rigidly regulated normative environment. On this view, inaugurating new intelligibility is a necessarily futural project and the humans we are saving from abjection are those who could be subjectivized differently in the future. The problem is that nobody will benefit. No future being can be saved from abjection because in the Butlerian frame the subject can only be constituted through forces of abjection.[26] On this view, while the intelligible subject determines the abject state as the subject's constitutive outside it does so as a reflection of the perimeters of intelligibility: the constitutive inside. Thus, per Butler, abjection operates internally to subjectivation: there is no further outside. The subject and the abject exert exclusionary/creative power over one another within the formation of a single subject out of a psychic excess. Therefore, there is no potential being that is barred from existence by subjectivation. Indeed, there are no abjected beings at all. Thus, on the transcendental reading, there is no way to bring the abjected into the subjective, which is required for its politicizations. For the same reason, there is no way to work toward freedom, justice, and equality for the abjected. Therefore, on the transcendental reading, there is no way to work for the ideals apparently guiding Butler's work.

The "Kynical" reading may avoid the naiveté of the existential and the problematic commitments of the transcendental reading and explain why Butler has not distinguished between the two levels. On the Kynical reading, Butler adopts disruptive insubordination akin to Diogenes, deconstructing and delegitimizing the dominant logic from within its symbolic paradigm, both implying and refusing the "tainted" categories of transcendental or existential, as well as logical, rational, material, discursive, metaphysical, or philosophical. On the Kynical reading, Butler aims to destabilize the power

at play in laying claim to traditional categories, problematizing these basic delimiting concepts as pernicious and unthought commitments in the dominant logic. Support for this reading can be found in Butler's explanation of the purpose of the re-signification of terms as capturing the unavoidable embedded status of thought and language within historical-cultural  sociopolitical limits implicated in discussions over what life is.[27] Unlike the Kynics of antiquity, instead of defending bucolic ethics, Kynical Butler's goal is to realize freedom through resisting the dominant paradigm of intelligibility.[28] In this reading, Butler intends to be impossible to pin down, to defy conventions, without supposing to fully extend beyond their influence: to beguile, to confuse, and inaugurate a new relationship to ontology.[29] In the terms of this reading, Butler's use of overlapping and even inconsistent ethical, epistemological, ontological, and metaphysical frames, as well as their use of pejorative and normative language, is employed to target complex preconscious psychic and discursive functions so as to encourage a self-reflective analysis of our visceral response to provocation to shift perspectives concerning the depth of normative violence.[30]

Unfortunately, the Kynical reading is also deeply problematic. While Butler's theoretical commitments allow for the distance from norms requisite for critique, full distance is rendered impossible by their own account of their constitutive depth. On Butler's model, we must be subject to the norms we subvert. A consequence of this view is that imagining the power to step outside the grip of norms would contradict the need to subvert them.[31] For this reason, one would expect Butler's deconstructions to remain on recognizable terms with that which they purport to subvert, but Butler refuses to critique/ engage traditional categories such as ontology on their own terms, and as such, the subversion loses its thrust. For example, in lamenting lesbianism's "exclusion from ontology,"[32] talking about changing "the distribution of ontological effects," "recirculating" and "re-signifying" ontological "operators," and most of all when "endowing with" or "inaugurating" ontology,[33] Butler does not do enough justice to the concept to claim to subvert it. Refusal is not subversion. Put differently, if we argue, as Butler does, there is no access to an extra-discursive realm to adjudicate between claims to ontological objectivity, not only is this to adopt a nuanced ontology, to remain coherent one cannot put forward alternative ontologies either to post-structuralism or the dominant ontological paradigm of erroneous naturalization. For the same reason, in claiming the power to "inaugurate a new ontology" while simultaneously calling the concept of ontology "profoundly tainted," Butler again veers too close to incoherence. Moreover, even if we can see past this objection, to speak of inaugurating alternative ontologies leaves unanswered the questions: How are we to judge the effects of ontology discourse? Upon what foundation could we justify subversion? And how could we *change ontology*?

If the pernicious biases functioning at the level where discursive structures constitute experience are contingent and contestable, then surely the commitments that motivate such contestation are equally vulnerable, and even if we did have such power, what right have we to prefer these biases over others? While Butler resists traditional concepts of sex and gender, discourse, logic, ontology, and identity as such, they uphold subversive freedom, justice, nonviolence, and equality. Perhaps there is an explanation for why these ideals survive deconstruction while the very structure of language, reasoning, and phenomenology do not, but Butler does not offer one. This can leave the reader wondering why to apply Butler's critique precisely where they do and not where they do not. At this point, Nussbaum's critique is impossible to ignore.[34]

Putting the metaphysical and epistemological opacity aside, the ethics at play are clear and compelling. If, per the existential reading, we read Butler as critiquing the discourses which normatively erect and sustain the perimeters delimiting which humans are deemed worthy of dignity and respect: we must also read the project as intended to improve the situation for the currently marginalized. If we read Butler's project per the transcendental reading—as deconstructing normalizing discourse at the deepest levels of intelligibility—it seems intended to render visible instances and varieties of violent abjection we may otherwise be blind to, and even recalibrate discriminatory consciousness in response. Per the Kynical reading—utilizing paradox and performative contradictions to deconstruct norms embedded in the very structures of inference—Butler aims to break down the forces which discursively enclose the horizons of embodied life, to carve out a future in which new "unimaginable" freedoms can emerge. Whichever heuristic we adopt, Butler is encouraging us to interrogate how prejudices and biases place limits that we can potentially transcend. Indeed, Butler is straightforward and transparent about this normative dimension of their work.[35] It aims, Butler writes, at expanding "the very meaning of what counts as a valued and valuable body."[36] The rationale for supposing our heuristics then stems not from if, but how, we are to ground such a project. Therefore, if these are legitimate heuristics, we can claim an underlying aspiration to curtail violence, increase freedom, to contribute to realizing justice, and equality, all of which are, broadly speaking, liberal ideals.[37] However, as Butler's placing of "normative" in scare-quotes suggests, this idealism is problematic. On the Kynical and transcendental readings, the project fails its guiding aspiration, and a straightforward articulation of the existential reading—the only option upon which it is realizable—is prohibited by Butler's commitments. As we saw, this is because, according to Butler, the discursive realms of intelligibility which dictates whose lives matter as well as the freedom to contest this regulatory normativity operate within the perimeters dictated by normative

violence. Therefore, Butler cannot avow the ideals guiding their theories. To do so would be to commit normative violence, the very power Butler aims to contest. This marks the impasse many post-structuralisms interested in equality, justice, freedom, nonviolence, and human rights are prone to encounter. The will-to-deconstruction is a consequence of ideology critique predicated on the observation of implicit bias, the absence of canonical interpretations of experience, the stability of viewpoint of value, or overarching truths, and the consequent commitment that value systems risk potentially oppressive discrimination, a worry that Butler makes very clear: "To assume . . . a substantive notion of the universal is of necessity to impose a culturally hegemonic notion."[38] This is why, although the existential reading is the most useful for those invested in contesting normative violence, Butler nevertheless resists it. The impasse is that the language popular in such projects, certainly in Butler, of violence and abjection, discrimination, exclusion, expulsion, obliteration, subjection, oppression, freedom, liberation, democracy, and so forth invariably invoke categorical structures indebted to overarching narratives and value systems. When describing their "performative contradictions" as "flying in the face of those who would say "but aren't you presupposing?" and replying to their imagined interlocutors: "No! My speech does not necessarily have to presuppose. . . . Or, if it does, fine! Deal with it,"[39] my thesis is that they presuppose liberal ideals and that the reluctance to avow them stems from tensions between a clear normative aspiration at pains to avoid normative violence. This tension between ideals and ideology critique is analogous, albeit in a highly intellectualized form, to the Liberal Cynic as portrayed in our reading of Lorrie Moore's Benna Carpenter: compelled to self-designate as "post-ideological" while remaining in a fraught relationship with liberal ideals and ideology critique. We called this "Inauthentic Ideology Critique as Failed Avowal" and described it as a condition combining the critical appreciation of the vulnerability of ideals with concealed or unacknowledged commitments. It seems then, that we have a form of Inauthentic Ideology Critique as Failed Avowal in early, and most pointedly, middle Butler.


## CYNICALIZATION AND "CRUEL OPTIMISM"

As well as containing both forms of Inauthentic Ideology Critique, in *The Psychic Life of Power* Butler also evidences fidelity to, or a deepening of, the pessimistic/problematic features of their critical inheritance such that it both raises and prohibits hope. This relates to the notion of "Cynicalization" and "Cruel Optimism" defined in the literary phenomenology toward the end of chapter 1. Cynicalization was our term for the processes diagnosed in Sloterdijk's genealogy of the descent of enlightenment into Enlightened

False Consciousness. This descent occurred as the legacy of revelatory critiques ruled out the emancipatory features of its own linage. Cruel Optimism was the emotionally fraught phenomenologically complex feature of Liberal Cynicism, where the cynic seeks hope but limits potential candidates to that which its constitutive and exhausted ideology-critique purports to, but ultimately cannot permit. We find examples of both Cynicalization and Cruel Optimism in middle Butler, most clearly in *The Psychic Life of Power*, which is to say, therein, Butler both problematizes the emancipatory within its intellectual inheritance, as well as promising and simultaneously prohibiting hope. We can see this in Butler's appeal to a formal symmetry between Nietzsche's notion of sublimation, Freud's theories of narcissism and melancholia, Althusser's theory of interpellation, and Foucault's theories of subjectivation.

Concerning Cynicalization, *The Psychic Life of Power* inherits and entrenches the negative elements in Butler's use of Nietzsche, specifically the mechanism by which morality creates bad conscience. Butler takes up Nietzsche's diagnosis of a normatively violent morality which, through bad conscience and existential guilt, carves out the psychic interiority constitutive of modern self-reflexive subjects and compels a passionate attachment to self-subjection.[40] By locating a passionate attachment to a self-beratement—which Nietzsche locates within the purview of the critical consciousness—in the unconscious and rejecting that a pre-socialized vitality violently foreclosed in moral subjection can be liberated from this pernicious normativity, Butler immobilizes contesting normative violence. While Nietzsche regarded guilt and bad conscience as conditions that can be consciously appropriated for emancipatory ends for Butler, this masochistic requirement is necessary, leaving the subject unavoidably vulnerable "to a power not of its own making."[41] In response to this worry, it might be argued that by portraying the depth with which our discriminative capacities make us vulnerable to both being victimized by and committing violent abuse on the social and political level, Butler's psychic entrenching of normative violence aims to mobilize sympathy with concrete situations of exploitation. To explain, while we are all vulnerable to normative violence vulnerability manifests differently concerning one's relations to the norm in question. For example, a homosexual is more likely to be the victim of harsher concrete consequences of normative violence than the heterosexual, even though on this psychic level the violence is similar (the exclusion of the otherwise sexed). The unique vulnerability then is that the normative violence produces beings intelligible as more or less worthy of hate/violence/persecution than others. The unique sympathy could emanate from realizing that both this corporeal vulnerability of sexual non-conformism and the likelihood of persecution is a consequence of deep psychic functions: "that subjects are constituted in primary vulnerability does not exonerate the abuses they suffer, on the contrary, it makes

all the more clear how fundamental the vulnerability can be."[42] In this way, Butler's normative language of abuse, exploitation, subjection, abjection, and obliteration, may function to excite their contestation. However, it remains impossible to mobilize any kind of social or political action based on a theory of a priori vulnerability. Therefore, while going some way to make finer distinctions among cases of violence, as well as linking "inaugural" violence to actual states of abuse and exploitation and by theorizing the mechanisms of normative subject formation as they relate to subjugation and exploitation, Butler nevertheless fails to ground contesting abuse and exploitation, the unequal distribution of vulnerability at the societal/political and biological level, and the mechanisms of normative subject formation as they relate to subjugation and exploitation. In short, Butler's Nietzscheanism raises and then dashes hopes of emancipation from oppressive norms.

Following *On Narcissism: An Introduction*,[43] "Mourning and Melancholia,"[44] *Civilization and its Discontents*,[45] and "The Ego and the Id,"[46] Butler uses Freud's theories to describe the psychic working of heteronormative power claiming that a self-destructive psychic circuitry prefiguring normative masochism is a universal socially instantiated condition.[47] On Freud's account of melancholic foreclosure, a love object once known to the analysand is later repressed.[48] Butler's picture of melancholia differs crucially from Freud's. For Butler, the narcissistic internalization typical of melancholia is a feature of subject formation and the love object was disavowed before the formation of the ego. Because Butler designates the narcissistic self-beratement typical of melancholia as a creator of subjectivity and not as a contingent affliction, as per Freud, it is no longer a psychopathology that therapy can ameliorate. Indeed, according to Butler foreclosure is foundational to subject formation.[49] The result is that whereas for Freud the loss which compels melancholia was once known, on this image, it was never known, while for Butler melancholia forms the very boundary of the subject.[50] While the Freudian picture admits to action-compelling forces of which we are unaware, many of these forces relate to neuroses that are contingent and traceable to local personal experiences which, if analytically revealed, can be ameliorated. On Butler's view, although not causally deterministic, the forces which form subjects are necessarily beyond the reach of those subjects and the effect of therapy (assuming the maintenance of subjectivity is a basic therapeutic demand). Therefore, Freud's ameliorative purport, its promise, and hope are compromised in Butler.

The Cruel Optimism here also begins with a feature that distinguishes Butler's account of melancholia from Freud's. While in "Mourning and Melancholia" Freud argues that melancholia begins with the loss of a loved person, for Butler, melancholia involves the internalization of a prohibited desire and the disavowed grief concerning its unavailability. On the back of

this innovation, Butler promises a new focus for contesting the disastrous effects of heterosexual melancholia: "in the social foreclosure of grief we might find what fuels the internal violence of conscience."[51] The problem is that this is impossible given the role Butler gives the repudiation of desire in the coming into being of a self-conscious subject. Nevertheless, after laying out the necessity of foreclosure for consciousness, Butler states at the very end of the argument, that it is not necessary "for identification to oppose desire,"[52] and suggests that after locating the points whereby punitive norms compel the internalization of prohibited desire in the emergence of psychic interiority, we could imagine processes to retroactively destabilize the formative grip of foreclosures poised to manifest in identitarian hatred.[53] This excites the hope that we can contest how subject formation internalizes necessarily delimiting social norms through the foreclosure of desire. But Butler's account of subject formation entails the foreclosure and repudiation of desire. If the claim is that volatilization of social norms at the level of critique enables us to loosen ourselves from their normative grip at the level of the preconscious, then why not just say that, and explain how? If the processes prefiguring subject formation could be constructively directed to correct certain pernicious downstream effects or to bring about the possibility of new future inaugurations then this account would pose a potentially revolutionary possibility, but without prolonged elaboration on both how their theory allows for this, and what actions in the conscious arena could direct these processes, this hope remains an impossible and desirable fantasy; a Cruel Optimism.

Butler also inherits a restricted version of interpellation—Althusser's model of subject formation via submission to ideological categories initiated through language[54]—arguing that subjects motivated by a "guilty" recognition of the necessity of the laws under which identity categories within a specific ideological paradigm are sustained through an unconscious submission to the dominant ideology.[55] Moreover, per Butler, we are all constituted by this variety of psychic submission.[56] On this view, the cost of subject formation— the foreclosure of certain psychic possibilities—is "chosen" by the subject in its inauguration. Again, while for Althusser subject formation functions within existing subjects, for Butler, it is a priori and unconscious, therefore the grounds for contestation in Althusser's model are rendered impossible in Butler's.[57] Thus, Butler retains Althusser's account of oppression but thwarts his hopes for liberation. Moreover, Butler's Althusserian account of psychic resistance cites that because the act of hailing in interpellation can miss its demands are therefore not absolute. From this indeterminacy, Butler theorizes an alternative variety of "being" potentially inaugurated contra the guilty complicity with oppressive norms. Butler goes as far as claiming that this offers a new ethics.[58] However, if answering *the call* is a condition for the possibility of being a subject, then utilizing this resource would require the

ability to hover between realms of unrealized and realized unconscious iden-tification. Moreover, because missing the call of interpellation remains an event necessarily outside of the subjective domain, even if it were possible, it is impossible to bring such volatilization into consciousness, let alone the sociopolitical realm.[59] The Cruel Optimism stems from the fact that refus-ing to submit to the law of interpellation must operate in space necessarily post-interpellation, but it cannot. Thus, when Butler promises some precon-scious ontological resource that exceeds interpellation coexisting alongside but independent of the formed subject to be utilized in producing a more expansive "ethical" subjectivity, this idea is hoisted by its own petard.

*The Psychic Life of Power* also *cynicalizes* Michel Foucault's theories. Foucault revealed ruptures in the evolution of power as fundamentally unpre-dictable, contrary to traditions which highlight shifts in power as logical, consciously directed, or direct-able including the enlightenment's juridical model, Hegelian dialectics, the existentialist's notion of power possessed by certain constellations of committed subjectivity, or the Marxist idea of eco-nomic power as unfairly distributed. Opposed to these, Foucault's disruptive strategical model of power sees it as immanent, omnipresent, and relational, not something which can be acquired or seized, and that it is both "non-subjective," and something from which there is no escape.[60] Butler shares Foucault's theory of subjection as a contingent and incomplete working of power.[61] For Foucault, the critique of power might be politically mobilized because critique reveals that there is no necessity for power to *express itself* in specific oppressive social and political norms.[62] As elaborated in *The History of Sexuality*, "The Subject and Power," and *Discipline and Punish* this realization can be utilized for political ends.[63] Given that we cannot escape power's dominion, resistance is limited to refusing to operate under the current conditions of power's more pernicious machinations. This refusal could stall, or short circuit the unnecessarily and undesirably delimiting, yet contingent way subjects are currently formed. As Foucault explains:

> The target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political "double bind," which is the simultaneous individualization and total-ization of modern power structure. The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state and from the state's institutions but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.[64]

Because  sociopolitical efforts are based on theories, anticipations, or desires, they necessarily operate within the scripts of various regulatory and disciplinary regimes offered up in the current constellation of power. Because intelligibility is set by power, its non-teleological ruptures and discontinuities are not driven by human ends. Therefore, on the Foucauldian picture, we have no right to think of power shifts as directed by our efforts. Indeed, per  Foucault, because resistance can only exist in the strategic field of power relations there is no justification for thinking that a rupture will, can, *or should* happen in a certain direction.

> There is no single locus of great refusal, no soul of revolt, no source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary, instead, there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case. They are possible, necessary, and probable, others are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; some of those are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial.[65]

Per Foucault, we have no epistemic foundation for thinking power dynamic can be changed in accordance with our evaluations, for we could only ever attest to a "new" paradigm from within the scripts allowable by the current one. Although there may be room in Foucault for activism designed to contest the conditions under which certain nefarious forms of subject formation occur, because it places agency entirely within the purview of contingent disinterested power, Foucault's theory is tricky for mobilizing significant sociopolitical resistance. In Butler's innovative project of supplementing Foucauldianism with psychoanalysis, these already scant grounds for optimism are further problematized. This problem stems from a moment of infidelity. While for Foucault subjection functions on the body, subjectivation in Butler occurs at the point of intersection between the conscious and the unconscious.[66] When Butler promises that agency "is constrained by no teleological necessity,"[67] this promised freedom is dashed because: "whatever resists the normative demand by which subjects are instituted remains unconscious."[68] Thus, when Butler raises the hope of a psychic resistance to power,[69] since they fail to account for the reciprocity whereby conscious activity could somehow retroactively influence these preconscious functions, this too amounts to Cruel Optimism.[70] The claim appears to be that the norm-governed perimeters which delimit the enactment of performative actions do not map onto the perimeters of human agency. On this understanding, agency is the psychic potential that is materialized through performative acts in the accomplishment of identity, a theory that leaves "wiggle" room for contesting harmfully normalizing discourse.[71] Tragically though, this is a freedom at the cost of subjectivity.[72]

## CONCLUSION

A representative selection of Butler's work on materialization and the psychic mechanisms which prefigure it bear hallmarks analogous to Liberal Cynicism. In the work on materialization, we find Inauthentic Ideology Critique as Failed Avowal: a reluctance to admit to the liberal values on which it depends. We also find in this work, and in *The Psychic Life of Power*, Inauthentic Ideology Critique as abandonment: reifying the inefficacy of the liberal values on which it depends. Because Butler entrenches and deepens the ideology critique of their lineage without upholding or replacing its emancipatory purport, we find features resembling Cynicalization in *The Psychic Life of Power*. Butler's efforts to imagine against the imperialism of social norms can leave sympathetic readers further bereft of hope about the prospect of mobilizing the ideals of nonviolence, justice, and equality. Because of this, a Cruel Optimism plagues a broadly liberal sociopolitical invested reading of middle Butler where we find the possibility of resisting oppressive power thwarted by their own account of its insidiousness, thereby perpetuating cynicism concerning the ideals that attract the liberal reader to their work. However, as we will see, "later" Butler offers a resource for overcoming both the cynicism in their work and for overcoming Liberal Cynicism more generally. It is toward this line of argument which we will now turn.

## NOTES

1. Derrida's account of normative violence has it as "an original transcendental violence, previous to any ethical choice" and as a "preethical violence." Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 125. For Levinas, the exclusory violence in the encounter with alterity is prior to norms of ethics and morality. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay in Exteriority*, ed. Alphonso Lingus (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969). For Kristeva, normative "abjection" relates to a subjectivity enabled through repeated patterns of expulsion, but it too, is not operative on the political level. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon. S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

2. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 5.

3. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 3.

4. Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of the 'Postmodernism,'" in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (New York: Routledge, 1995), 17.

5. Ibid.

6. Butler, "Contingent Foundations," 17–18.

7. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller and J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Wanderer and His Shadow," §18, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1976); Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (London: Hackett, 1998); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, eds. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

9. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1962); Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1999), 584–89; Sigmund Freud, *Freud's "On Narcissism: An Introduction,"* eds. Joseph Sandler, Ethel Person, and Peter Fonagy (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

10. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), 127–88.

11. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 3

12. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 27.

13. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 14.

14. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 20.

15. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3.

16. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 15.

17. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 16.

18. Grounds for the transcendental reading can be found where Butler talks of the "ontology of expulsion" at play in the invisibility of lesbianism versus the despicability of male gayness, how male and female homosexuality occupy different realms in cultural legibility as set by the symbolic imaginary. Butler claims that while male homosexuality is hyper-visible and vulnerable to specific kinds of violence precisely because it is despised, and while male gayness is "awarded" a greater ontological reality, by contrast "Lesbianism is not explicitly prohibited in part because it has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and namable . . . the political is a context in which the lesbian doesn't exist" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 126).

19. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 8.

20. Irene Costera Meijer and Baukje Prins, "How Bodies Come To Matter: An Interview with Judith Butler," *Signs* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1998): 277, 280.

21. In explaining materialization as "somewhat different form Foucault" Butler "aligns with the Kantian tradition." Costera Meijer and Prins, "How Bodies Come To Matter," 279.

22. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and Abington: Routledge, 2004), 31.

23. All from Costera Meijer and Prins, "How Bodies Come To Matter."

24. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xv.
25. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3.
26. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3.
27. Costera Meijer and Prins, "How Bodies Come To Matter," 280.
28. Ibid.
29. Costera Meijer and Prins, "How Bodies Come To Matter," 280–81.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," 20.
33. All from Costera Meijer and Prins, "How Bodies Come To Matter."
34. Martha C. Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler," *The New Republic*, February 22, 1999, https://newrepublic.com/article/150687/professor-parody.
35. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 21.
36. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 22.
37. It may be objected that there are other heuristics than these three or that I am superimposing ideals onto Butler's middle work, then criticizing the places where those ideals are not supported. I would respond in two ways. First, I would point to the arguments in chapter 3. Second, I would add, that even if we do not see progressive liberalism within Butler's theory, the general uptake of their theories have been primarily from portions of liberal progressivism, and therefore, even if there is a case to be made that my reading superimposes liberal progressive ideas onto Butler's world (I strongly resist this), the exegetical tensions my reading highlights would be relevant to similar readers, of which there are, I would suggest, many.
38. Butler, "Contingent Foundations," 7.
39. All from Costera Meijer and Prins, "How Bodies Come To Matter."
40. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 22, 64, 24, respectively.
41. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 20
42. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 64.
43. Freud, *Freud's "On Narcissism: An Introduction."*
44. Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 584–89, and "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1995), 239–93.
45. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1962); Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 584–89; Freud, *Freud's "On Narcissism: An Introduction."*
46. Freud, "The Ego and the Id," 239–93.
47. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 104.
48. It may be relatively plausibly objected that "The Ego and the Id" supports Butler's reading. This is not straightforward and would simply shift the consequent problematic onto Freud as well as Butler.
49. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 23.
50. Ibid.
51. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 183.
52. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 149.
53. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 163.

54. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," 127–88.

55. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 116.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

58. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 131.

59. Furthermore, it is hard to imagine in a psychoanalytically internalized account of interpellation what "forms of linguistic survival" taking place in a "de-subjectivized domain" would amount to.

60. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. Robert J. Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990).

61. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 84.

62. "I would like to suggest another way to go further toward a new economy of power relations, a way which is more empirical, more directly related to our present situation, and which implies more relations between theory and practice. It consists of taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point. To use another metaphor, it consists of using this resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, and find out their point of application and the methods used." Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (Summer, 1982): 780. "Even though consensus and violence are the instruments or the results, they do not constitute the principle or the basic nature of power," Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 789.

63. Coupled with over-determining the particular forms it takes, for Foucault, power has a tendency to self-subvert, and therefore carries with it the resources and potential for contesting its current instantiations relevant to those pursuing freedoms from certain machinations of power: "At the very heart of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. . . . The relationship between power and freedom's refusal to submit cannot, therefore, be separated," Foucault "The Subject and Power," 790.

64. Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 785.

65. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 95.

66. Foucault's project of resisting what we are, speaks of "a new economy of power relations," "which is more empirical, more directly related to our present situation" and "implies more relations between theory and practice," Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 785.

67. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 15.

68. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 86–87.

69. Furthermore, when Butler offers a potential route out, they introduce the notion of a "remainder" in the psyche beyond the constructed subjectivity, some space within which we may contest the cookie cutter effect of norms on the psychic "reservoir" the Lacanian real, "imagination" and "fantasy" at various stages in the book (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 86–87, 94–98, 122), these are insufficient categories to carry out such a function. (Although claiming in footnote 6, chapter 3 of *The Psychic Life of Power*, 206, that "in this analysis . . . psychoanalysis is only to be represented by these two figures," Freud and Lacan, there are no direct references to Lacan in the

book. And in the footnotes there are only two: Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan [New York: W. W. Norton, 1978], and Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli [New York: W. W. Norton, 1991]).

70. If we compare the possible applications of Foucault's to Butler's account—for example, how the barbaric punitive practices which produce radically dehumanized subjects such as the docility of panoptical prisoners or the somnambular of those confined to solitude as locations for contestation by removing this cruel punishment once we have located the machinations of subjectivation within the unconscious, without an account of how such concrete practices relate to the unconscious preconditions for experience—the possibility of coming up with similarly applicable solutions is, at best, remote.

71. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 15.

72. Ibid.

# Part 2

## *Conclusion*

While invested in liberal ideals, Judith Butler's middle work inherits a legacy of ideology critique which problematizes their explicit adoption and through reifying oppressive power structures precludes their efficacy. It is for these reasons that we can read middle Butler as sharing Liberal Cynicism's Inauthentic Ideology Critique both as failed avowal and abandonment. *The Psychic Life of Power* observes a cynical fidelity to and a deepening of negative features of its inheritance, raising hopes prohibited by, or by prohibiting hopes raised by this inheritance. Therefore, it can be said to resemble Cynicalization. Finally, while exciting hopes its own theoretical frame prohibits, this phase of Butler's work also exhibits signs of Cruel Optimism. For these reasons Butler's "middle phase" resembles Liberal Cynicism. "Later" Butler offers a resource for overcoming both the cynicism we diagnosed in their work and along with more positive contributions from Butler's theoretical framework, for overcoming Liberal Cynicism. We turn now in part 3 to grounding and theorizing this overcoming.

# PART 3

# The Promise

# Part 3

## *Introduction*

Part 1 explained how for Extreme Liberal Cynicism the repression of its constitutive and fraught hopes manifests in the reduction of critique to criticism, a lack of self-transparency, an anger at idealism and idealists, and even taking delight in exposing folly. It also explained how Liberal Cynicism is susceptible to the radicalization of "fantastical" fascistic master narratives due to their offer of assuaging liberal cynical pain. A goal of part 1 was to show that Extreme Liberal Cynicism contains the motivational impulses for overcoming its repressive extremes and the resources for doing so. The primary goal of part 3 is to theorize this overcoming by providing an inoculation for cynicism's self-imposed hopelessness. Theorizing this inoculation takes Liberal Cynicism's constitutive hope as its starting point. To this end, chapter 5 returns to Sloterdijk, specifically to the successes and failures of his proposed solution to cynicism. This analysis will enable us to outline conditions that a successful response to Liberal Cynicism must meet. This will provide the foundation for our study in chapter 6 of how "later" Butler can be seen to exemplify and be used to theorize a model for Extreme Liberal Cynicism overcoming its pernicious extremes. This work grounds the heuristic for addressing Liberal Cynicism via a synthesis of Sloterdijk and Butler with which this book concludes.

*Chapter 5*

# Cheekiness

For Peter Sloterdijk, cynicism is what survives from within the Enlightenment after it abandons its ideals under the weight of critique. Given the scarcity of Enlightened False Consciousness, we need not overemphasize Sloterdijk's diagnosis, but because Sloterdijkian cynicism shares crucial features with Liberal Cynicism and because he proposes a solution, continued analysis of his solution may furnish solutions here too.

## CHEEKINESS

Arguing that cynicism is genealogically entrenched in modern Western consciousness and "because consciousness-raising is irreversible,"[1] Sloterdijk contends that cynicism cannot simply be abandoned, instead, for any response to cynicism to persuade, it must remain faithful to it. The proposed solution is to overcome cynicism from within, through immanent critique. For Sloterdijk, certain features of Kynicism, specifically the critique of naiveté, the pursuit of truth, irony, and autarky, have remained within the Enlightenment lineage and its descent into cynicism. However, since cynicism does not share these features to the same degree, reinvigorating these waning Kynical virtues could mount an immanent critique targeting that which contemporary cynicism does not share with its ancestor: a panicked egoism, neediness, insufficient self-criticism, and joylessness. In this way, Kynicism represents "a source of enlightenment in which [cynicism's] secret vitality is hidden"[2] promising a "Kynical re-enlightenment"[3] of Enlightened False Consciousness. For Sloterdijk, this critique must use the spirit-lifting and joyfully disruptive power of satirical insubordination, or "cheekiness."[4]

Importantly, on Sloterdijk's reading, cynicism's problems are reducible to egoism. For this reason, Sloterdijk proposes that satirical critique, or cheekiness, should be employed for "liquefying"[5] the "'hardened' cynical ego."[6] Sloterdijk cites early Heidegger and invokes a "crypto-Buddhist"[7] model to

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mount this critique. Per Sloterdijk, the Heideggerian critique of "Dasman,"[8] which deconstructed the psychic and sociocultural forces that compel blind conformity, is simultaneously a critique of contemporary cynicism. Sloterdijk's reappropriation rests on his critique of *Being and Time*, namely that a desperate unwillingness to let go of the ego left Heidegger vulnerable on the psychological side to the anxious pursuit of perpetual self-creation, and on the sociopolitical side, to the ego-restorative narratives of national socialism. However, per Sloterdijk, Heideggerian angst and guilt also provide the opportunity to deconstruct the ego.

While Sloterdijk describes Heidegger's Kierkegaardian notion of throwing oneself into a particular existential possibility—"being-unto-death"[9]—as "the philosophical keyword in the age of imperialist and fascist world wars,"[10] he nevertheless prescribes using Heidegger's methods for deconstructing the ego by developing conscience from ontological guilt into an awareness of the precariousness of all life. Specifically, it is Heideggerian anxiety— which Sloterdijk calls the "experience of the meaninglessness of life,"[11] and a "crystallization point around which a philosophy of Kynicism can develop,"[12] that is the means to overcome cynicism. Per Sloterdijk, existential guilt can initiate a reverse dialectic to the degenerate "Cynicalization" of enlightenment into enlightened-false-consciousness by "decynicalizing" cynicism through a re-enlightenment. On this suggestion, instead of following the Heideggerian prescription to preemptively mourn what "I" might have been, anxiety could instead turn us toward realizing that we may have been, and still are, the Other. Instead of following early Heidegger's prescription to overcome the anxiety that accompanies nonconformity by forcefully adopting a contingent identification fortified by the realization of finitude, per Sloterdijk, we should choose to remain in anxiety. According to Sloterdijk, anxiety is a state of existential openness that incorporates possibility as the essence of authentic agency. This openness, which Heidegger desired to hold off with assertive identification, is also the condition for a radical openness to the Other. Rather than Heidegger's version of romantic individualism, for Sloterdijk, remaining in anxiety but looking outwards rather than inward can compel us to use this "call to be guilty" away from Heidegger's fascistic masculinism toward a "realization of an exuberant life,"[13] taking off from the "melancholy nimbus"[14] of Heidegger's "self-obsessed, narcissistic, and megalomaniacal authenticity by reclaiming an ecstatic other-love."[15]

> Ecstasy, the dissolution of the ego, is recognized as the precondition for cosmic communication. At the same time, it provides a presentiment of the reconciliation of human beings with one another. . . . "Authenticity," if the expression is to have any meaning at all, is experienced in love and sexual intoxication, in irony and laughter, creativity and responsibility, meditation and ecstasy. In this

release, that existential individual (Einzige), who believes its most intimately genuine (eigenst) possession is its own death, disappears. At the summit of potentiality, we experience not only the end of the world in lonely death but even more the demise of the ego in its surrender to the most communal world.[16]

As well as enabling an embrace of communal ethics through this decon-struction, neo-Kynicism counters the cynical melancholy that can follow existential self-constitution when we identify and yet perceive the delimiting contingency of identification. Per Sloterdijk, the cynic drifts between despon-dence and a panicked reification of self/ego in response to the demand to make something of ourselves, with the critical appreciation of the final futility of such a project. Paradoxically then, because this reification of self manifests in the hyper attachment to identity markers and identity security, the cynic is increasingly materialistic, conformist, and absolutist. In response, the Kynical amplification of Heideggerian angst into ego-less-ness discour-ages cynicism's neediness and reawakens its ancestral autarky. This, per Sloterdijk, would free the cynic from the illusion of perpetual precariousness exacerbated by the romantic imperative to self-create and advanced capital-ist consumerism which also compels the cynic's "suspension of the ethical" which it deems "requisite for 'progress.'"[17]

This neo-Kynical critique also attacks and therefore frees cynicism from the emotional/intellectual neediness and fraught sense of self-worth which contributes to the painfulness of cynicism, which in turn renders it susceptible to its destructive extremes. Through Socratic humility, the Kynic evades the cynics' panicked need to identify as intellectually superior primarily because: "the Kynical sublation of theory stems from a conscious not-knowing, not from a knowing better."[18] The Kynic embraces its own ignorance as the yardstick for all human knowledge, refusing the false consolation of seeing things as they are and instead favoring a relentless ironicization of all claims to knowledge, becoming a *Socrates gone mad.*[19] This greater fidelity to truth and critique, broken free from limiting restraints, enables a greater degree of self-awareness and aids in the critique of cynical egoism. Through nonco-operation with the discursive forces of materialization, objectification, and identification, Kynical agency frees itself from the constraints of a panicked need to uptake constructed identity categories which, in a cynical age, is to be freed from cynicism. By saying "no to weakness and neediness"[20] the Kynical revitalization releases dormant libidinal energies from within cynicism sus-tained inchoate from Diogenes, "a 'secret' and vital agency"[21] the alternative to cynical egoism, a self-generating agentless agency which Sloterdijk calls a "yesbody":

An original Nobodiness remains in this world buried under taboo and panic. The self-conscious nobody in us—who acquires names and identities only through its "social birth"—remains the living source of freedom. The living Nobody, in spite of the horror of socialization, remembers the energetic paradises beneath the personalities . . . which we should not call *nobody* but *yesbody*.[22]

Concerning the will-to-truth, the Kynical revitalization embraces cynicism's fatalism concerning the enlightenment's hopes for a universally applicable reason; the radical epistemological relativism that Sloterdijk calls "knowledge cynicism."[23] However, adopting a "satirical resistance, an uncivil enlightenment, [a] *non-Platonic dialogue* . . . against the rigged game of 'discourse,'"[24] Kynicism no longer pretends to conform to the dominant erroneously universalized picture of rational society, a move which could make cynicism honest and counter the inertia of argumentative stalemate. Also related to the pursuit of truth, Sloterdijk combines a variety of "mindfulness . . . which restricts itself to alertly seeing what is the case,"[25] compassion, and a more Socratic than Kynical irony as the means to realize genuinely universal truths from within the cynical constitution:

Only through forbearance and tranquillity would subjective reason be capable of hearing an objective reason within itself . . . rooted in the experience of enthusiastic tranquillity when, on the summit of having-thought, the thinker steps aside and lets himself be permeated by the "self-revelation" of truth.[26]

For Sloterdijk then, the choice cynicism faces is "between the false self-experience in collective suicide" of functional melancholia, or giving up on the cynical ego; a "suicide of false subjectivity in real-life experience." Sloterdijk warns us that if "the heirs of the enlightenment" choose the first, they will remain "on the way to a global cynicism."[27] On this view, Western intellectual history compels a choice between cynicism or Kynicism, between the self-imposed curse of modernity or the emancipated spirit of its ancestor. Through cheeky insubordination of the status quo, as custodian of vital embodied energies that have not been appropriated by material and immaterial forces governing the psyche, Kynical satire[28] overcomes cynicism's hardened egoism and releases an oceanic reserve of emancipatory libidinal energy ripe for disrupting the cynical world order to create a more joyful and free society, carrying on the "struggle for the greatest ideals . . . justice, reason, heroic courage, the legitimacy of power, love,"[29] to continue "to dare to know."[30]

# OBJECTIONS

*The Critique of Cynical Reason* remains a good account of the apathy and disillusionment that can thwart critique and offers to instill a new vitality and energy in a tradition that can stagnate. But while in the rare and rarefied context of ideology, critique's ossified dialectic, biting honesty, and disinhibited forthrightness is surely welcome, Sloterdijk's solution is not only limited in its possible application, it is also beset by theoretical difficulties. It hypostasizes a neo-Kynicism perfectly suited to oppose Enlightened False Consciousness, and yet is unfaithful to both. Sloterdijk's theory of neo-Kynicism maintains a fraught relationship with truth and rests on a wildly speculative theory of human agency. Rather than a solution, Sloterdijk's Critique is an intellectual example of Liberal Cynicism. Worse still, it advertises a dangerously amoral and apolitical agency while failing to police against its harmfulness.

Concerning hypostatization, in "Punching Out the Enlightenment,"[31] Neil Wilson charges Sloterdijk with warping cynicism into totalitarianism expressed in his description of our age as characterized by the subjection of every action, emotion, or thought to instrumental rationality: "A totalitarian world characterized by the complete subjection of every action, emotion, thought or decision to an instrumental rationality simply does not exist."[32] This is both argumentatively ill-supported and conveniently constructed such that Sloterdijk's model of Kynicism is perfectly equipped to counter it. In *Cynicism and Postmodernity*, Timothy Bewes regards Sloterdijk's call for neo-Kynicism "nothing more radical or challenging than yet another flank in a pervasive rearguard action against postmodern 'inauthenticity,' which is to say, it is both dangerously apolitical, and deeply cynical in its false reification of postmodernity."[33]

This hypostatization can also be seen in Sloterdijk's infidelity to both cynicism and Kynicism. The suggestion that cheekiness is a deconstructive process that reveals the objective truth of the "highest ideals" would have Kynics from Diogenes and Menippus turning in their graves. On the classic Kynical view, the evidence for the value of following animal impulse is experience not intellectual analysis, and the evidence for the value of self-discipline is the experience of the limits to indulgence: there is no appeal to objective theory. Moreover, the primary vehicle of Sloterdijk's neo-Kynical insubordination is irony which seems more an achievement of culture than a natural impulse. This infidelity continues, as the "truths" which Sloterdijk claims this neo-Kynical enlightenment would embrace, especially reason and love, are so questionable to both traditions that to assume that anxious deconstruction, self-discipline, critique, meditation, and irony would somehow render them

plausible, requires more argument. The cynic has given up on, and the Kynic never embraced, such ideals.

Sloterdijk's hypostatization can also be measured by improper historicizing, for although framed within a historical analysis, Sloterdijk constructs cynicism and Kynicism as "constants in our history."[34] Sloterdijk also implies a qualified Marxist critique but eschews the task of locating the duo within a network of power relations. Sloterdijk's praise of gestural insubordination also neglects the extent to which bodies are inscribed within dominant discourses by relying on an essentializing discourse of the body separable from intellect interjecting from outside and into the field of discursive subjectivation. Andreas Huyssen asks the pointed question in his forward to *Critique of Cynical Reason*: "How would Sloterdijk counter a Foucauldian claim that the resistance of the self-conscious body is produced by the culture of cynicism itself as a regenerating and legitimating device?"[35] Sloterdijk does not offer an answer. Indeed, Sloterdijk's theory of the "yesbody" depends on a crude dualism between mind and body and a magical interaction between the two, with neo-Kynical satire functioning at the level of embodiment as opposed to the purely intellectual contemporary cynicism. As well as contradicting his professed non-dualism, Sloterdijk unargumentatively asserts the persistence of this miraculous accessible pre-cultural agency capable of enacting a new enlightenment revealed by a bodily irony.

Concerning Sloterdijk's solution to the polarized nature of postmodern political discourse, while arguing that cynical egoism conceals objective reason from itself and that it can be reclaimed by applying meditation and Kynical critique, he has not done enough to explain how a tradition that questions objective truth could reveal objective truth to a condition that rejects objective truth. Without establishing this post-dialectic non-universalist conception of truth, Sloterdijk's belief that adopting a "satirical resistance, an uncivil enlightenment, [a] *non-Platonic dialogue* . . . against the rigged game of 'discourse'"[36] could counter argumentative stalemate mired in relativism, remains fanciful.

Concerning Sloterdijk's Liberal Cynicism, his analysis assumes that the relentless and suspicious unmasking of reason, ethics, equality, and justice is an inevitable consequence of enlightenment critique. In laying out the futility of liberal politics and its alternatives and the complete exhaustion of critical theory, Sloterdijk concludes from frustrations at the pace of liberal progress that it has no efficacy, in effect announcing the total victory of an "explosive and unassailable" cynicism.[37] Therefore, Sloterdijk succumbs to Liberal Cynicism's Inauthentic Ideology Critique as an abandonment of its constitutive idealism. Sloterdijk dismisses communicative rationality, the possibility that law and morality can be rationally justified, that rational self-governance and virtue are possible and relate to the achievement of happiness, and

that knowledge requires an intellectual struggle that can be worth it. But these ideals *are* the enlightenment. In denying any truth to enlightenment claims and neglecting enlightenment ideals' positive legacy and persistent emancipatory potential, Sloterdijk's attempt to embrace a surviving notion of the liberal enlightenment ends up reinforcing what it sought to oppose.[38] Sloterdijk's is not the correct diagnosis of corruption at the heart of enlightenment liberalism, it is the logical conclusion of his Liberal Cynicism. As Neil Wilson concludes in "Punching Out the Enlightenment: A Discussion of Peter Sloterdijk's Kritik der Zynischen Vernunft": "the work is self-canceling":[39]

> The author locates himself in the Kynic's corner to fight off his own cynicism. He relieves his frustrations with activism and reveals his hopes . . . but he ends up in the same cynical place where he began. The work is parasitic upon the very strategies and tactics the author appears to be trying to defeat.[40]

Much like the Liberal Cynic, Sloterdijk seems torn between the impulse to reject the Enlightenment due to its failings and to maintain fidelity to its ideals, between the self-confident snigger of the ruthlessly critical satirist and the romantic dreamer, between extreme pessimism and naïve optimism. Sloterdijk also suffers from Cruel Optimism. This is to say, as well as replicating German romantic anti-intellectualism in abandoning the Enlightenment by offering up a naïve alternative, Sloterdijk also reproduces its utopian anachronism. Calling the Enlightenment an unrealized "utopian archaic scene" and persuasive argument "an epistemological idyll" and "a beautiful and academic vision" upholding "the healing fiction of a free dialogue,"[41] Sloterdijk prohibits his enlightenment aspirations and, in fantasizing an idealized alternative to the insufficiencies of his tradition and heritage, both raises and prohibits hope:

> I have a dream to see the dying tree of philosophy bloom again, to flourish, without disappointment, saturated with bizarre flowers of thought red, blue and white, in original unfaded colors from which sprouts a fantastic, ironic magic tree with thoughts, treasures, singing nightingales and swinging monkeys.[42]

There are also huge problems concerning the practice and methodology of neo-Kynical cheekiness. While the Kynic scoffs at cynical hypocrisy and dishonesty, it replaces fidelity to rational dialectic with laughter unpolluted by ideals. But Sloterdijk argues that the extra-rationality of a form of enlightenment forced to branch out from dialectic and detach from its noble goals to satire was both symptomatic of and perpetuating contemporary cynicism, but his solution proposes the same. Furthermore, Sloterdijk values sarcasm precisely because it is just and truth-revealing but again, justice and truth

are Enlightenment ideals. It appears we are in a bind: if neo-Kynical satire is beyond ideals then it cannot continue the Enlightenment, but if it remains invested, then it isn't neo-Kynicism.

More worryingly, in freeing cynicism from ideals, neo-Kynicism veers dangerously close to Master Cynicism. This is all the more troubling when we see the themes connecting the liberated amoral neo-Kynicism, the Heideggerian authenticity it labels as fascistic, and Nazism: the promise of pure restoration in a corrupted world, *all we have to do is destroy that world*. This may sound extreme, but Sloterdijk is being more than merely rhetorical when he describes the Kynical project as based on "the profound idea of world extermination."[43] Sloterdijk appears as did Mephistopheles to Faust, promising escape from the "needs" of morality, law, or duty. Stripped of guilt, doubt, and conscience, Kynicism risks a wanton immoralism, and although insisting on compassion in his Buddhistic model of ego-transcendence and emphasizing the Kynic's harmony of act, nature, and cosmos as its ground, Sloterdijk fails to provide a convincing theory of Kynical benevolence, as Andreas Huyssen notes:

> [neo-Kynicism] depends on a logic of hostility that the new reality principle of a softened, flexible subjectivity is supposed to overcome. It is difficult to imagine a nonhostile, nonobjectifying satirical laughter, and Sloterdijk never really addresses the question of what kynics actually do to the persons they laugh at.[44]

Sloterdijk's attempt to legislate the border between an ideal Kynicism and its corrupt counterpart and neutralize Kynical misanthropy relies on the harmony of life doctrine, and the mental peace of a disinhibited "non-schizoid" consciousness. But these criteria do not guarantee nonviolence or civility. This is an attempt that belongs to a longstanding tradition from Julian, Epictetus, St. Augustine, all the way to D'Alembert and Diderot that attempts to rid Kynicism of its potential for destructive social violence and to make it into a universal philosophy. All of these methods of disambiguating Kynicism are unable to deal successfully with the tensions and ambiguities that mark its concrete expression. For example, the famous anecdote where Diogenes saw three women hanging from a tree and remarked, "I wish every tree bore similar fruit," exemplifies vitriolic and brutal misanthropy bleached out in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment's selective reappropriation.

Even if we accept the picture of Kynical kindness, while Sloterdijk warns that cheekiness is likely to be "answered from the side of the attacked" by "outrage" that could "go as far as extermination,"[45] he never develops a defense strategy against the backlash on those who practice Kynicism nor does he ask how such a backlash would limit its success. However attractive this romantic vision of egoless authenticity, when it is presented as a

substitute to political theory and praxis based on a defensible normative aspiration, it must account for the chaos it is likely to unleash.[46] In disinhibiting cynicism from ideals, it advertises and releases a dangerously amoral and apolitical agency and fails to police against its harmfulness. In sum, neo-Kynicism is an unacceptable solution to Liberal Cynicism. As Luis Navia explains in response to the misanthropy of Greek-Kynicism: "a remarkable passion for virtue and moral freedom"[47] is required to police the violent risks of disinhibited post-ideological cheerfulness.

## RETURN TO ROW

By turning to Jess Row, we can explain how, despite these critical errors, Kynical satire may aid the project of addressing Extreme Liberal Cynicism. Row argues that Sloterdijkian Kynicism has a role to play in countering the painful fatalism around the issue of race relations in America. As we saw in our literary phenomenology, the reification of inequality is both a condition and symptom of Liberal Cynicism's self-perpetuation and political inertia, a fatalism which Row thinks Kynical satire can overcome. Cynical fatalism is a libidinally motivated psychic move adopted unconsciously to ameliorate the feeling of powerlessness or guilt concerning the failures of liberalism. On this view, by reifying forces that render these failures insurmountable, this powerlessness and guilty complicity is eclipsed by hopelessness which, while unpleasant, is nevertheless preferable. Therefore, if Row's application of neo-Kynical Cheekiness can subvert extremely cynical fatalism, it may also thwart the mechanisms of extreme cynical repression.

In the context of race relations in America, a psychic cause for fatalism is that acknowledging the scarcity of realizable justice is more painful than the presupposition of its impossibility. Thus, Extreme Liberal Cynical hopelessness may incorporate a reification of inequality. In this way, anger and inertia are preferred to working toward equality. This delusional absolutism allows the Liberal Cynic to maintain moral self-respect without taking individual responsibility or engaging in self-critique and for letting a situation they abhor persist. For Row, the radical racial satire produced by comedians of color is uniquely equipped for overcoming this disastrous and painful delusion. This stems firstly from a feature satire shares with all comedy: that its inability to age well is the flip side of an ability to engage a unique socio-historic context. In addition, satire has a special capacity for "double entendre": an ability to simultaneously engage various evaluative stances under a mutually welcoming and challenging critical gaze. Through this capacity, racial satire addresses trauma, realism, joy, catharsis, difference, guilt, insecurity, denial, anger, optimism, despair, and hope simultaneously.

Crucially, this coalescence is not intended to harmonize or rank differences, rather this disorienting, self-implicating, and equal-opportunity mockery "disarms" lazy identifications and juxtaposes realism, guilt, humor, and hope in discombobulating simultaneity, achieving an "intimacy and plasticity"[48] and a refusal to endorse any ideology. Row argues that this carves open space for remembrance, acknowledgment, and therapeutic release, allowing for a calmer appreciation of terrible truths which may in turn ground the pursuit of a united response: "Does comedy affirm what we already think we know, and who we already think we are, or can it enlarge what we know, and who we think we are?"[49]

But how does this relate to Extreme Liberal Cynicism? Kynical satire can mobilize liberal goals in a manner uniquely equipped to appeal to liberalisms vulnerable to cynicism by embracing cynical critique without refusing hope. This mutually implicating critique disarming egotistic identifications could condition a more realistic view on the failing of our ideals, and our failings of them. Buffered by the carapace of ironic distance, this universally critical and inclusive comic exposure, while validating cynicism's mockery of naiveté and its willingness to face up to man's folly, could allow for the cynic's pain and vulnerability to reach consciousness, and thereby contest repression. Concerning our taxonomy, satire could be utilized to address Cynicalization by ironicizing the canon's authority, thereby challenging its negative legacy. Concerning Inauthentic Critique as failed avowal, through a minimally antagonist ridicule of the failure and contingency of all ideals, self-implicating cheekiness has a chance of rendering the Liberal Cynic's values transparent, fallible, and valuable. Concerning Inauthentic Critique as abandonment, a minimally antagonistic disarming self-implicating satire could compel an owning up to vulnerability born of the painful re-witnessing of the challenges to liberalism. This could make possible a realization of its own assumptions, fantasies, delusions, insecurities, ideals, guilt, privilege, anger, and despair, thereby therapeutically weakening their grip. Ideally, this would expose Liberal Cynicism's absolutizing of hopelessness as adopted to ameliorate inadmissible powerlessness and guilt, exposing extreme cynicism's absolute pessimism as emotionally driven rather than the intellectual martyrdom of a rigorous realism, and thereby mount an immanent critique of its delusional fatalism.

Before endorsing this ambitious appropriation, we must draw again from Row to clarify how to overcome the risks we outlined in our objections to Sloterdijk. Row is well aware of the risks, giving as examples of applied neo-Kynical cheekiness the now infamous cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed and describes it as a rageful "weaponized comedy."[50] Crucially though, Row's application of Sloterdijkian Kynicism remains subordinate to a normative aspiration based on nonviolence, human rights, justice, democracy,

and equality. With such policing in place, satire could be used to deconstruct the cynical ego and productively release repressed cynical libidinal energies, and in directing its self-implicating attacks at the liberal insecurity, both mourn our failures and allows for some hope in response. In this sense, satire could play a positive role in the general project of overcoming extreme cynicism, the call to remain between Extreme Liberal Cynicism and naiveté, to sustain competing impulses of trauma-born despair and hope.

## CONCLUSION: LESSONS FROM CHEEKINESS

Our look at cheekiness allows us to produce some conditions which a successful response to Extreme Liberal Cynicism would have to meet to be successful. We can take from the failure of Sloterdijk's romantic utopian reappropriation of Kynicism that solutions to cynicism must remain faithful only to what is within it, and that a persuasive critique of Extreme Liberal Cynicism cannot invoke some secret agency to remain immanent. Such a critique must draw from resources within cynicism that could be used in resisting its own pernicious extremes. From Sloterdijk we can take this to include the mockery of naiveté, consolation, and irrationalism belying respect for truth. In addition to chapter 2 warning about assuaging cynical pain, our look at Row and Sloterdijk helped us clarify this worry and claim that any response must remain subordinate to a normative aspiration. Of course, this too must draw from within or at least remain plausible to cynicism to be persuasive. Within our qualified appropriation of satire, we took that a response to Liberal Cynicism would benefit from employing a self-implicating critique designed to disarm egoistic identifications such that its ideals and emotional relationship to those ideals are acknowledged and acknowledged as vulnerable. A chief component is the radical Socratic humility of the Kynic who embraces its own ignorance as the yardstick for all human knowledge, maintaining its right to a radical ironicization of knowledge without assuming intellectual superiority.

From Row's appropriation, we saw that by targeting all as potentially complicit in the problems it seeks to overcome, and by acquiring an openness to diverse solutions, policed cheekiness could disrupt the inertia of argumentative stalemate by avoiding the reduction of opposing views to "false consciousness" (challenging the anti-solidarity both in the "left" and between the "left" and those it's supposed to serve and once incorporated, the working class). We should also retain the insight that the critique of cynicism would be wise to target its deepest attachment: the ego. Sloterdijk located cynicism's self-defensive and self-aggrandizing behavior as emanating from a desperate clinging to a confused sense of self-worth. We developed this

as including the fear of enlightenment persisting within a cynicism resisting self-critique due to an inchoate feeling that it would lead to a loss of self: to death-in-life. But while Sloterdijk's alternative demand is that cynicism push through this obstacle and deconstruct its hardened ego to release a new source of extra-ideological vitality, this is too dangerous. Nevertheless, as in Row, this neo-Kynical immanent ego critique can be mobilized under the policing of a clearly articulated normative aspiration. Thankfully, we know that Liberal Cynicism, unlike Enlightened False Consciousness, is not beyond ideals. This raises the possibility of a critique furnishing us with policing ideals from within Liberal Cynicism. Furthermore, the goal of neo-Kynical ego critique would be different for Liberal Cynicism than Enlightened False Consciousness, because its traumatized self-preservation and fear has not "clouded from view" the inchoate energies of a magical neo-Kynical yes-body, but the value, efficacy, and responsibilities entailed by its constitutive idealism. Consequently, a critique that reveals that hopelessness impedes escape as well as belying fear, guilt, and its ideals, may provoke a reassessment of these ideals. At our most ambitious we could hypothesize that Kynical satire could encourage the genuine autarky of accepting uncertainty and taking responsibility for the success of its values.

To remain immanent, and therefore persuasive, this reassessment has to be made compatible with the cynical conscience, with its will-to-truth, and its historical geopolitical consciousness. Indeed, this is a point where Sloterdijk's instance on the linear direction of Cynicalization is legitimate. Sloterdijk's conviction that certain values are forever lost to ideology critique was let down by his romantic resurrection of an antediluvian ethic, but his attempt to utilize the cynical critical impulse against its remaining naiveté—egoism—was more faithful to this insight. This insight reduces to the claim that romanticizing post-ideological solutions to cynicism are unlikely to succeed. What we are proposing is an immanent critique of Liberal Cynicism that revitalizes liberal ideals while retaining something of the rationale within the forces compelling this disavowal. As Neil Wilson asks: "Why is it necessary to find a natural starting point that is independent of our enlightenment traditions? . . . Why not continue the attempt to clean up our game? Why not think the Enlightenment through once again? Why not make a garden out of all that dirt?"[51] To make this garden, instead of Sloterdijk's *plot* to replace the "dying tree of philosophy" with an "ironic magic tree,"[52] we should cultivate liberal ideals by subjecting them to rigorous critique. While it may be too ambitious to assume this would follow merely from a neo-Kynical critique of Liberal Cynicism, a deeper reflection on the resources within Liberal Cynicism and reflection on Judith Butler can help us explain both why and how Liberal Cynicism might swap the easiness of painful fatalism for the

deep challenges of upholding an ambivalent and critical commitment to reinvigorating its constitutive ideals.

## NOTES

1. "Always a bit unsettled and irritable, collaborating consciousness looks around for its lost naïveté, to which there is no way back, because consciousness-raising is irreversible." Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 6.

2. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 99.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. "Verflüssigung," Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 379.

6. This is as extreme as it sounds, for Sloterdijk's dramatic Nietzschean pursuit of "overhumanism" (Ibid.) calls for a dissolution of the human as we know it: "Humanity cannot be enlightened because it itself was the false premise of enlightenment. Humanity does not come up to scratch . . . where its ego appears there cannot shine what was promised by all enlightenments," Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 355.

7. Ibid.

8. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962 and 2008).

9. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 247.

10. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 202. Sloterdijk also described a proto form of cynicism in the Weimar Republic as "matter-of-factness unto death," Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 521.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 467.

17. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 17.

18. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 293.

19. Plato's alleged description of Diogenes in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers: Book 6, Chapter 54*, trans. Robert Drew Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950).

20. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 468.

21. Ibid.

22. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 73–77. To explain this empty neo-Kynical agency Sloterdijk rewrites Adorno's famous analysis of Odysseus and the Cyclops (Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002]). In Homer's epic, Odysseus lands on an island and, together

with his men, enters a cave filled with provisions. After six of his men are eaten, Odysseus offers wine to the culprit, the Cyclops Polyphemus, who responds by asking his name, to which Odysseus replies: nobody (οὔτις and Οὖτις, as translated in Georg Autenrieth and Robert Keep P., *An Homeric Dictionary: For Use in Schools and Colleges*, [London: MacMillan, 1902]). After the monster falls into a drunken sleep, Odysseus drives a wooden stake into the monster's eye and when he cries out for help against "nobody," his fellow giants think him possessed and recommend prayer. Odysseus and his men escape. Adorno uses the story to allegorize the failure of the enlightenment, reading Odysseus as denying his identity under threat of death, and through his cruelty to the monster, descending into comparable depths of inhumanity, symbolizing the enlightenment's capitulation into what it opposed. By contrast, Sloterdijk's Odysseus transcends the weakness of ego perseverance, escaping the violence of raw power and selfishness symbolized by the cyclops—who can only see things one way—by elevating himself beyond the need to identify.

23. "The secularization, naturalization, and objectification of our understanding of the world," Ibid. "The story of Doctor Faustus can be understood as a document for the unsettling of the older metaphysical dualism through the new empiricism," Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 362.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 541.

27. All ibid.

28. Exemplified in the Menippean tradition of Kynicism. Menippean satire is characterized by attacking mental attitudes rather than specific individuals or entities. Other features found in Menippean satire are different forms of parody and mythological burlesque, a critique of the myths inherited from traditional culture, a rhapsodic nature, a fragmented narrative, the combination of many different targets, and the rapid moving between styles and points of view. The form is named after the Greek Kynic parodist and polemicist Menippus (third century BC). His works, now lost, influenced the works of Lucian as well as Seneca the Younger and were revived during the Renaissance by Erasmus, by Voltaire and Diderot in the Enlightenment, and significantly influenced Rabelais, Swift, Voltaire, Blake, Carroll, Huxley, Joyce, and Vonnegut. Indeed, ever since Mikhail Bakhtin defined Menippean satire as one of the classical "serio-comic" genres alongside Socratic dialogue, philosophers of the Carnivalesque have elevated it above the more misanthropic methodologies of the other Kynics. For Bakhtin, Dostoevsky represents the highest point in the genre. In a series of articles, Edward Milowicki and Robert Rawdon Wilson, have argued that "Menippean" is a term for discursive analysis characterized by a mixed and discontinuous way of writing that draws upon multiple distinct traditions. It is normally highly intellectual and typically embodies an idea, or an ideology, or a mind-set in the figure of a grotesque, even disgusting, comic character. Critic Northrop Frye observed: "the novelist sees evil and folly as social diseases, but the Menippean satirist sees them as diseases of the intellect," Northrop Frye and Robert Dayton Denham, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006). See footnote 292 on this legacy of selective reappropriating Kynicism.

29. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 545.

30. "Sapere aude" 306, citing Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: "What Is Enlightenment?"* trans. H. B Nisbett (London: Penguin, 2009).

31. Neil Wilson, "Punching Out the Enlightenment: A Discussion of Peter Sloterdijk's Kritik der zynischen Vernunft," *New German Critique*, no. 41, Special Issue on the Critiques of the Enlightenment (Spring–Summer, 1987): 53–70.

32. Wilson, "Punching Out the Enlightenment," 66.

33. Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1997), 29.

34. "Kynicism and cynicism are constants in our history, typical forms of a polemical consciousness 'from below' and 'from above,'" ibid. Cynicism "forms a basic figure of the revocation of values in the historical process. In 'it' ideologies awaken to themselves. Ostentatiously, they scintillate in malevolent ineluctability," Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 384.

35. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Andreas Huyssen, foreword, xviii. The same question may be legitimately asked of later Foucault, who in his lectures on Kynicism makes the body the privileged site for contesting existing relations of power, taking the body as the site of practices of self-fashioning that concretely redefine the subject's position within the social games that fashion our "souls."

36. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 18.

37. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 3. "Does not everything speak for the view that the Grand Inquisitor's logic has triumphed, according to which a returned Jesus would be burned on the pyre of the Holy Inquisition, a returned Nietzsche perish in the gas chambers, a returned Marx rot alive in a Siberian labor camp? Is there a law that regulates as such?" Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 4.

38. Sloterdijk even intimates as such: "We wanted to learn something about cynicism and discovered in doing so that it long since brought us under its domination," Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 217.

39. Wilson, "Punching Out the Enlightenment," 67.

40. Wilson, "Punching Out the Enlightenment," 67.

41. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 14.

42. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 29.

43. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 28.

44. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Andreas Huyssen, introduction, 29. Louisa Shea details this legacy of partial infidelity to cynicism as the chief cause of the emergence of the category in its contemporary form in Louisa Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

45. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 103.

46. This section paraphrases an argument made by Leslie A. Adelson and Michael Bernstein from: "The Bomb and I: Peter Sloterdijk, Botho Strauß, and Christa Wolf," *Monatshefte* 78, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 500–513, and "The Poetics of Ressentiment," in *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges* eds. Gary Saul Morson and Emerson Caryl (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989).

47. Luis E. Navia, *Classical Cynicism: A Critical Study* (Westport: Greenwood, 1996).

48. Jess Row, "American Cynicism and Its Cure," *Boston Review*, May 18, 2015, https://bostonreview.net/articles/jess-row-american-cynicism/.

49. Row, "American Cynicism and Its Cure."

50. "Arguments about freedom of expression, necessary as they are, tend to obscure another aspect of these works: by taking comedy to its furthest extreme, to the point where the work provokes not only adversarial violence but state violence in response—what we might call weaponized comedy—these artists engender a kind of solidarity, the catharsis, cohesion, and elation of a mass audience, that they could find no other way. As Morrissey put it: if it's not love, then it's the bomb that will bring us together," Row, "American Cynicism and Its Cure."

51. Wilson, "Punching Out the Enlightenment."

52. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 28–29.

# "Later" Butler and Overcoming Liberal Cynicism

We saw in chapter 4 that "middle" Butler struggled to engage with their guiding, broadly liberal, normative aspirations. A charitable reading of Butler's post-9/11 works has them mobilize a theory that explicates and grounds the optimism previously posed in self-defeating forms. This new theoretical frame also retains fidelity to the insights from the previous work and fortifies their guiding ideals. As such, Butler's "later" work provides an example of overcoming Liberal Cynicism's extremes by utilizing its saving power.

## OVERCOMING THE CYNICAL "IMPASSE"

In the post-9/11 works, Butler's career-long project of lessening the punitive restrictions and expanding the perimeters of life imposed by social norms de-emphasizes the discursive and psychic preconditions for subjectivation in a Psychoanalytic Foucauldian frame, and reemphasizes their contestability in a more experiential frame. Thereby, Butler overcomes the failed avowal in the work on materialization and realizes the hopes excited and unfulfilled both there and in *The Psychic Life of Power*, by following a clear ethical imperative to show where, how, and why harmful norms may be disrupted at the level of action.

## OVERCOMING INAUTHENTIC IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE AS ABANDONMENT

As we have seen, while invested in contesting it, Butler's view of the constitutive depth of normative violence problematized this aspiration. The problem stemmed from a failure to successfully distinguish between necessary

normative violence and political and ethical violence. Contrary to the transcendental reading of Butler's theory of abjection which failed to theorize the contestation of necessary normative violence at the pre-experiential level of perceptual categorization, the existential reading had Butler critiquing the conscious domain in which the practices and discourse responsible for erecting and sustaining the normative perimeters delimiting what solicits care. In the later material, Butler continues the movement begun in *The Psychic Life of Power* from liveability to grievability, and endorses the existential reading. For example, *Frames of War* explicitly rejects what Butler calls the transcendental thesis:[1] "I would caution against a generalization of the thesis that all normativity is founded in violence . . . this kind of claim can function as a transcendental argument [which would] make violence essential to any and all subject formation."[2] Supporting the existential reading, *Undoing Gender* settles the debate as to whether we are referring to actual or hypothetical beings: "there are at least two senses of life, the one, which refers to the minimum biological form of living, and another which intervenes at the start, which establishes minimum conditions for a liveable life."[3] While Butler previously seems to reject the notion of humanity in degrees, in *Frames of War* Butler describes discursively mobilized dehumanization as when lives, although apprehended, are not apprehended as fully living.[4] Therein, Butler also separates the existential and transcendental registers by distinguishing between apprehension and recognition,[5] explaining that while all subjects are apprehended, recognition is the discursively mediated faculty responsible for grounding normative judgments: "What we are able to apprehend is surely facilitated by norms of recognition, but it would be a mistake to say that we are utterly limited by existing norms when we apprehend a life."[6] In the later work then, Butler avoids the absurd consequence of the transcendental reading that we do not apprehend the dehumanized.

## OVERCOMING INAUTHENTIC IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE AS A FAILED AVOWAL

The theoretical innovations in Butler's later work, outlined above, also go some way to overcoming Inauthentic Ideology Critique as Failed Avowal, the condition whereby the extent of critique prohibits avowing a nevertheless guiding normative position. In critiquing the violence of norms which dictate the basest of moral status—grievability—Butler not only maintains the critical project but clarifies who they are fighting for: "Norms operate to produce certain subjects as 'recognizable' persons and to make others decidedly more difficult to recognize."[7] We have an answer then to the perplexing question from *Bodies That Matter* whether or not there are actual victims of the

violence Butler would have us contest. While this concept of recognition still functions at the depth of experientially constitutive intelligibility, because of this distinction between apprehendability, recognizability, and grievability, its role at conscious and sociopolitical levels is clearer, as Butler themself puts it: "The question is not whether a given being is living or not . . . it is, rather, whether the social conditions of persistence and flourishing are, or are not, possible."[8]

*Undoing Gender* also overcomes a critical problem from within *The Psychic Life of Power* and the earlier work which problematized the avowal of the guiding normative aspiration, specifically the refusal to explain the partial applications of radical deconstruction. Performativity implied a politics where subjects formed based on pernicious norms could resist the disciplining effects of these limitations by emphasizing the norms' contingent and performative nature. The reliance of norms on repeated performances over time grants subjects an opportunity to redraft disciplinary prescriptions and open new pathways for political and cultural life. However, there was an issue concerning the standard from which we should adjudicate between helpful and harmful subversion. This problem persisted in *Bodies That Matter* and *The Psychic Life of Power* with its radical subversion of language, logic, and intelligibility which, as well as relegating subversion to a preconscious realm, again called the justification of subversion into question. *Undoing Gender* puts this concern to bed by clarifying the role of critique as employed at the sociopolitical level to allow for marginalized forms of life the opportunity to flourish. Therein Butler advertises subversion "not to celebrate difference as such but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life."[9] Here, Butler asks the question Nussbaum said they could not: "which innovation has value, and which does not?" and while still appreciating that the standpoint from which to answer this question must be from within the existing context of norms,[10] Butler is clear that inclusivity, justice, nonviolence, and other means to shelter life are the norms we must commit to.[11] Per later Butler then, we must commit to the values within our shared imaginary, that are more conducive to protecting and furthering life.

## CYNICALIZATION AND "CRUEL OPTIMISM"

As well as clarifying varieties of violence and articulating a clear normative aspiration, later Butler also theorizes the space and power for critiquing and contesting harmful formative norms, thereby realizing optimisms hitherto posed in self-defeating forms. Previously, where Butler argued that the processes pre-figuring the performative sedimentation of pernicious social norms in the unconscious formation of the ego, the explanation for how to

contest them was insufficient. By contrast, *Undoing Gender* lays out plans for contestation which work on the newly developed account of the relationship between the concrete realm of political life, the intelligible realm of social norms, and the unintelligible realm where subjects are formed in relation to them. The problem was three-fold: What opens the space within subjectivation to mobilize it for alternative inaugurations? What could power such contestation? And what could justify it? While such a critical space was presupposed in *Gender Trouble*, *Bodies That Matter*, and *The Psychic Life of Power*, where the processes of gendered subject consolidation/formation entailed that subjectivating norms are within the purview of critical consciousness, Butler provided insufficient grounds for locating this space and for explaining why and how to use it for contestation. Here, we have a theory of where, why, and how to subvert norms. Firstly, the where: *Undoing Gender* theorizes how the critical relation occupies a distance from norms and explains that this space, not wholly scripted by dominant norms, might be subjected to immanent critique:

> The "I" that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also . . . maintains a critical and transformative relation to them. . . . This is the juncture from where critique emerges . . . as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living.[12]

In this way, we can make better sense of the cryptic disclaimer at the end of chapter 5 of *The Psychic Life of Power*: "The logic of repudiation that I've charted here is in some ways a hyperbolic theory, a logic in drag, as it were, which overstates the case, but overstates it for a reason."[13] This includes the idea that first, critical analysis of restrictive normativity affords a psychoanalytically therapeutic bringing into consciousness that which binds us if left uninterrogated, and second, that exaggerating the severity of libidinally invested normative violence through hyperbolic critique is particularly effective in loosening the bonds of pernicious norms. This reading is also supported in *Frames of War* where Butler claims not only that critique "focuses on the violence affected by the normative framework itself" but that critique itself promises "an alternative normativity."[14]

*Undoing Gender* also reiterates the why—sheltering and maintaining life—and in referring to a collective capacity "to articulate an alternative minority version of sustaining norms" begins to lay out how. Butler argues that "If my doing is dependent on what is done to me, rather the ways in which I am done by norms, the possibility of my persistence as an 'I' depends upon my being able to do something with what is done to me."[15] Heretofore, by locating the space for contestation within preconscious psychic machinations over which

we have no conscious control, Butler deeply problematized resistance. By contrast, in theorizing the power to offer an alternative account of normativity to sustain alternative norms or ideals and the electrifying Sartrean capacity to do something with what is done to us, Butler now goes further in explaining how "improvisation within a scene of constraint"[16] is actionable for sociopolitical ends.

## PRECARIOUS LIFE

For a fuller account of how we can actively contest pernicious norms and to see how Butler fulfilled hitherto unfulfilled hopes, we have to turn to *Precarious Life* and firstly, the problem as we had it in *The Psychic Life of Power*. The diagnosis of Cruel Optimism in *The Psychic Life of Power*—that it simultaneously promises and prohibits the means to realize its hopes—rested on the cryptic upturn at the end of chapter 5 where Butler claimed that subject formation need not oppose desire.[17] The problem was that Butler did not provide an account, nor of how it can be utilized for political and ethical ends. *Precarious Life* does both. Therein, Butler asks how the experience of grief motivates destructive political action and how it can be redirected to target pernicious narcissistic mechanisms and ground a generally applicable political ethics.

The theory of melancholy and mourning in *Precarious Life* works from that which compels the panicked performative reinforcement of pernicious norms, the causes of normative material violence, and the psychic cause of identitarian violence—the loss of prohibited desire. The new theory marks loss as a universal human experience[18] that exposes our vulnerability to, and dependence on, others, be they the loved ones, those who took them away, or other attachments reducible to primary desire. On this understanding, loss always involves more than just the relationship with the love object for this trauma is compounded by a loss of desire for self-identity, security, autonomy, invulnerability, and independence. In Butler's analysis, the mechanisms of mourning are surprising, unpredictable, and partially inaccessible and since loss is always traceable to an unsatisfied desire it follows that desire itself is at least partially inaccessible. In this way, the opacity of grief and loss reflects the opacity of desire. Loss also involves then, the thwarting of the desire for a coherent and transparent identity.

In Butler, just as in Freud, there are healthy and unhealthy responses to loss. For both, mourning is the healthy response, and melancholy is the unhealthy. In Freud, melancholia marks a refusal of loss and grief via internalizing the lost love object within the ego in the form of an idealized representation. Along with this idealized substitute, the initial love for it

and the hate at its departure from the real are both also internalized compelling a self-destructive narcissistic combination of self-love and self-hate. In Freud, the healthy response to loss is conscious mourning which is eventually replaced by the ability to substitute the lost object, to love again. Butler, sensitive to the cold mathematical logic of substitution, prefers an account of the healthy response to loss as accepting that loss permanently changes the subject.[19] The alternative—melancholy—incorporates the desires thwarted by loss into the ego. Rather than accept vulnerability, interdependence, and the opacity and incoherence of the self the desire for security, invulnerability, transparency, and coherence are internalized and idealized. Just as in Butler's analysis of homophobia, this ungrieved loss manifests externally as a preemptive hatred for the disavowed. Therefore, the unhealthy response to loss is the refusal to allow anything threatening the fantasy: anything suggesting vulnerability, insecurity, dependence, incoherence, self-doubt, and self-criticism.

With this theoretical foundation, *Precarious Life* psychoanalyzes how America's failure to grieve 9/11 motivated a betrayal of human rights, the suppression of criticism, and the resurgence of sovereign power. The suppression of criticism involved a refusal to contextualize Islamic terrorism in the history of US foreign intervention or global patterns of poverty and religiosity. Such attempts were delegitimized as exculpations, a context within which any political criticism of American foreign policy was immediately and uncritically defined as complicit such that a critical self-reflective liberalism's credibility withdrew from the media shaped collective consciousness. Instead, media coverage focused on the attackers' personal histories and shadowy Al-Qaeda "masterminds." On Butler's understanding, this was largely an effort to make sense of the events by situating them within a recognizable frame of subjective agency and charismatic leadership. Per Butler, this kind of exceptionalism and large-scale commemoration or "spectacular public grief,"[20] absolves us from engaging in causal analysis of the structural conditions that compel such acts by drowning out critical modes of questioning.[21] On the Butlerian analysis, that the national reckoning with vulnerability was followed by misplaced retributive violence, racism, and Islamophobia, and the reemergence of conservative authoritarianism was a result of refusing the aforementioned losses and incorporating the fantasies into the collective imaginary. Although problematized by this monumentality, the melancholic refusal to grieve related not primarily to the victims of 9/11, but the totalizable nature of the American identity, the omnipotence of America, and the superiority of its way of life. These then are the desires which are internalized and fantasized and which compel an urge to destroy that which threatens the fantasy. Due to the super-egoic internalization of normative discourse mobilizing melancholic denial, Islamic terror, Islamism, and indirectly Islam itself became idealized as a threat that must be destroyed. Tragically, this

idealization required another layer of melancholic foreclosure, the refusal to grieve the loss of life which ensued. The non-American lives which were lost in the name of shoring up the illusion of American invulnerability were inadmissible because to acknowledge such losses would challenge the fantasy of American moral superiority. However, this guilt could remain outside consciousness if normative discourse enacted a thorough dehumanization of what was lost *so it never had to be lost at all*. According to Butler, this process was reinforced by refusing the humanization of those responsible for terrorism or those non-American innocents who died in the attempts to eradicate it. In this way, the "ungrievability" of those who have died and continue to die because of American and allied military interventions in the Middle East can be traceable back, in part, to the inability to grieve the complex losses which the tragedy of 9/11 unleashed. This explains how the rash and reckless military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan and the many violent acts that comprise the "War on Terror" rest on insufficient analysis of the conditions that compel terrorism and unleash a cavalcade of violence that tragically, but unsurprisingly, in the effort to repress American vulnerability, have made America, and everywhere else, less safe.

Thankfully, Butler's new theory includes the view that grief can be used to thwart foreclosure before it enters inaccessible regions of the psyche. This is because for Butler, grief discombobulates the ego and forces a deconstruction of the illusion of an autonomous, independent, and coherent self, an experience which can either compel a panicked, even manic melancholic incorporation and foreclosure or be used to short circuit its narcissistic circuity. In the context of the War on Terror, the radically deconstructive effects of grief make possible a different response, namely a submission to a permanent transformation, forgoing the illusions of American value superiority, omnipotence, and invulnerability and instead realize the dependence and vulnerability of all Americans—as all people—on the nonviolence of unknown others. This realization connects Americans to the victims of terrorism all over the world and could usher in an appreciation of radical precariousness and the call to swap assuring mutual destruction which the refusal of vulnerability compels for the rational ethic of minimizing violence.

This theory makes good on the hope raised in *The Psychic Life of Power* that subjectivation could operate independently of the repudiation of desire,[22] because grief becomes the point where this possibility is actionable. The breaking apart of the ego, the rendering of our sense of self opaque, and laying bare the sustaining illusions of power mark the point where performative freedom is most fecund. In the vulnerability which grief makes possible, lies the way toward imagining processes to retroactively destabilize the formative grip of foreclosures poised to manifest as identitarian hatred, correcting pernicious downstream effects of social foreclosure and marking out a new ethic.

While this optimism is tempered by the consequent truth that the most power-
ful psychic urge in the face of grief is denial, by promising gradual cultivation
of skillful grieving, coupled with the targeted critique of discourse which
disenables it, we have an actionable goal for minimizing reactionary violence
and for realizing the hopes that were dashed in *The Psychic Life of Power*.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself* as well as *Precarious Life*, Butler develops
the humanistic possibilities of apprehending our constitutive "exposed" soci-
ality through grief, namely that this primal exposure whereby we are always
and already in an ethical relationship and where the desire for continued life
is potentially at risk can be used to develop a heightened sense of ethical
responsibility. Adopting elements from Emmanuel Levinas,[23] Butler theorizes
how our primary availability to the Other is the possibility for a new direction
in ethics:

> Grief contains within it the possibility of apprehending the fundamental social-
> ity of embodied life, the ways in which we are from the start, and by virtue of
> being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives
> that are not our own.[24]

Butler's theory of grief focuses on a feature of melancholia, the foreclosure
of interdependence. The ethical challenge is to accept rather than deny our
fundamental relationality.[25] By using knowledge of interdependence, incoher-
ence, and vulnerability afforded by grief one can become more responsive
to the vulnerability of others. On this view, respect for the inexhaustible
unknown in the intersubjective encounter, both of the "I" and the "Other,"
prepares an ethic based on our shared, invariable, and partial blindness to
ourselves, by revealing definitive incompleteness and vulnerability as loci
for human rights and instigating an experiential foundation for inaugurating a
normative culture sensitive to diverse and distinct forms of human life.[26] This
recognition provides a constant reminder of our constitutive sociality and an
avowal of a heretofore unspeakable vulnerability that our lives and deaths
are granted by biological, psychic, and socio-cultural powers over which we
have little influence. This will, in turn, Butler hopes, lead us to reflect on
"precarity":[27] the "politically induced condition in which certain populations
. . . become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death"[28] generating
presumptive empathy for the marginalized and persecuted:

> Although the dominant mode in the United States has been to shore up sover-
> eignty and security, to minimize or indeed foreclose this vulnerability, it can
> serve another function and another ideal. The fact that our lives are dependent
> on others, can become the basis for claims for non-militaristic political solu-
> tions, one which we cannot will away, one which we must attend to, even abide

by, as we begin to think about what politics might be implied by staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself.[29]

## RETAINING FIDELITY TO THE "CYNICAL" INHERITANCE

Butler's turn to ethics incorporates Freudian melancholy, the psychoanalysis of sexed and gendered identity, and the theoretical innovations from performativity. The elements thereof which ground the later theories include: (1) that the dominance of social norms requires performative iterations which sediment values through repeated embodied endorsement. (2) That this "performative accomplishment" is always accompanied by an acknowledged or unacknowledged panic which bears reliable testimony to the contingency of norms. (3) That since mourning becomes melancholia through socially compelled disavowal: melancholic narcissism is unintelligible without reference to sociality. And (4), that melancholic foreclosure is contingent and incomplete. The reciprocity of mourning and melancholia presupposes that conscious mourning ushers in the descent into the unconscious and its consequent psychic and concrete effects. Furthermore, given that subjectivation is based on a panicked performatively reified incomplete foreclosure of prohibited norms, it is without absolute grip. If it is without absolute grip, then the formation of the ego is never finished, and the mechanisms compelling performativity are contestable. Finally, if certain practices reinforce the contingent social norms which prefigure conscious and unconscious foreclosures, it follows that we may influence how mourning becomes melancholia by critiquing, imagining, and committing to different norms. Thus, these later theories work out the transformative implications within the earlier insights:[30] *Gender Trouble* explains how iterative behavior retroactively imbues prohibitive norms with a phenomenologically attestable but philosophically unsound necessity; *Bodies That Matter* explains how this process functions both as discourse and corporeally; and *The Psychic Life of Power* theorizes how an original experience of loss predates and inaugurates the ego, a loss which cannot be experienced but which subsists at the unconscious level and haunts the formed subject, and how melancholy designates a failure to grieve in which loss is refused and internalized and compels passionate attachments to performative commitments. In this way, the post-9/11 works complete the earlier projects to mobilize a new direction for ethics and politics, via thwarting social and culturally germinated prohibitions through a skillful appropriation of grief. This reading fits with comments Butler made in an interview with Thomas Dunn:

The sections on performativity are not fully thought together with the sections on melancholy, and so one might reflect upon a certain gap there, one that I have been trying to attend to ever since. If grieving is refused through a certain manic action, one that seeks to deny or magically overcome the loss one has endured or, simultaneously, the blow to one's efficacy that loss entails, then maybe one must undergo the deprivation and the humility that loss require.[31]

As well as maintaining fidelity to this theoretical background, Butler's later work maintains and engages more positively with its "most cynical" moments. For example, in the work on abjection and materialization the commitment to the depth of discursive constraints on intelligibility which dictates whose lives matter remains, as does the politicization, and the critique thereof, even the goal of deconstructing dominant logic from within its symbolic paradigm. Only here, once the shift has been made to norms of recognition, not apprehension, and guided by a very clear normative aspiration, this radical deconstruction once purged of its problems, remains fruitful, limiting itself to the critique of that which features in dehumanizations and other means to oppose sheltering and maintaining life.

An objection to this view may be mounted that Butler contradicts a commitment from the most crucial of their theoretical influences, the Foucauldian warning that the search for transcendental backing for politics inevitably fails. The objection would be that since the search necessarily operates within, and is constituted by, historical norms, discerning any ultimate foundation from which to assess those norms cannot work. Therefore, in claiming the category of grievability as a given, Butler appeals to a historically invariant transcendental universalism about the structure of human vulnerability. Furthermore, the objection may continue, vulnerability, grievability, and livability are also only intelligible in the context Butler mounts their theory to contest. We may reply first by saying that the vulnerability of life is neither culturally contingent nor need it be transcendentally deduced. Second, we can reply that in our context of an increasingly global interdependent intelligibility vulnerability, while a profoundly historically saturated contingent phenomenon, is nevertheless ethically vital. A third response is that Foucault's epistemic limitations on universal claims don't rule out the possibility of there being features of the human condition relatively stable across time. Fourth: Butler accounts for the Foucauldian by stating explicitly that vulnerability can change its meaning and structure.[32] Fifth, Butler doesn't nominate vulnerability as a transcendental[33] and accepts that both norms and that which is foreclosed in their internalization are contingent. Butler's Levinasian developments in *Precarious Life* enable a sixth reply within which grief, along with a variety of other dispossessive experiences, such as anger or desire, sensitizes the subject to its opacity—its internal unknowingness—and this becomes the

basis for tenuous claims of commonality that can stitch together new communities and ways of life. Therefore, given that a fundamental feature of the structure of interdependence is the essential unknowability of vulnerability, Butler evades the Foucauldian objection that their theory assumes transcendental access to the human condition as such. Furthermore, given the account whereby grief reignites our essential ethical interdependence does not assume a substantive sympathetic connection across contingent cultural boundaries, it does not require a problematic moral universalism. In this sense then, Butler's later works retain fidelity to the theoretical structures that upheld Liberal Cynicism, while overcoming it—that is, it is an immanent overcoming.

The post-9/11 work also retains fidelity to the post-structuralist commitments that normative violence and vulnerability are ontological truisms and that any ethics or politics trying to negate, argue around, or remove it risks a dangerous denial.[34] However, the later works propose skillfully navigating ubiquitous violence. In the new account, the possibility for performative sedimentations of norms ushering in alternative inaugurations of the subject is established through an appeal to employing destructive qualities in the service of enlightened alternatives. In this way, the picture of the self from *The Psychic Life* persists—caught interminably turning back on itself to sustain the ego, driven by a violent self-destructive passionate subordination to nevertheless unachievable demands, compelled into a panicked reification of pernicious norms—but unlike previously this passionate psychic self-berating can be consciously adopted, and "done" in a manner less likely to manifest in hostility, aggression, and violence. In this way, later Butler does not propose a new theory that rejects and abandons that which compelled our diagnoses. Instead, they maintain qualified fidelity to even its most "cynical" moments. Again, Butler's later work mounts an immanent overcoming of the middle phase's cynical extremes.

## REINVIGORATING LIBERAL IDEALS

As well overcoming the problems that permitted our association of their work with Extreme Liberal Cynicism and retaining fidelity to the load-bearing argumentative claims of the "cynical moment," Butler's later work also reinvigorates the ideals which guide the entire project. As we have seen, for Butler, appreciation of precarity and the inexhaustibility of the human ("the category 'human' . . . is not captured once and for all."[35]) could enable us to develop radically open cosmopolitan democratic politics:

> Any radically democratic self-understanding will have to come to terms with
> the heterogeneity . . . it is the condition by which a concrete and expansive

conception of the human will be articulated, the way in which parochial and implicitly racially and religiously bound conceptions of human will be made to yield to a wider conception of how we consider who we are as a global community. We do not yet understand all these ways, and in this sense, human rights law has yet to understand the full meaning of the human. It is, we might say, an ongoing task of human rights to reconceive the human when it finds its putative universality does not have universal reach.[36]

Butler's later work on agency and freedom repeats this pattern of detailing political applications of reinvigorated progressive liberal ideals both respectful of the liberal traditions and adopting a policed "cynical" critique of their potential naiveté in the service of "non-violent cooperative egalitarian international relations."[37] While critical of the liberal ideal of rational autonomy, Butler recaptures and reinvigorates the notion of freedom problematized in the earlier work by finding a place for it in a complex psychological and sociopolitical picture. Because Butler maintained the view throughout their career that there is no way of imagining a social landscape without limiting norms, they have always defended freedom in the form of escaping our exaggerated dependency on them. A benefit of theorizing in light of the inevitable constraints within an existing context of intelligibility is that the grounds for contestation are not located in some future realm we have to wait for or violently create, for the resources for overcoming the more pernicious locutions of power are to be drawn from within those very locutions, giving us hope with every injustice, and thus again, retaining fidelity to the here and now. In this way, Butler thus reinvigorates the classic liberal notion of freedom both in terms of removing the Cruel Optimism of aspiring to a utopian vision of total self-governance, exposing naïve liberation as a ruse and, in allowing a glimpse from within a field of constraints, the possibility of real freedoms.

To examine this idea more closely, it is worth returning to Butler's discussion of the illusions of coming out in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" which highlights the emancipatory power of restricting the notion of freedom. This reinvigorated notion of freedom is a resurrected form of that condemned in the *Psychic Life of Power*, a form best articulated in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" where Butler warns that the notion of coming out of "feigned heterosexuality" into "true homosexuality" risks perpetuating the reification of sex and gender upon which homophobia depends. If understood as coming out from a "false" identity into its "true" self, the danger is that this blinds us to the truth that the experience of sexuality cannot be reduced to the categories we use to describe it. According to Butler, that there is some fixed identity category waiting to give us a home, to dissolve our anxieties and provide completeness is an illusion perpetuated by popular narratives.[38] Per Butler, the danger is that a romanticized notion of freedom when proved

false can be deeply psychologically damaging. The second danger of naïve liberation discourse is that it forecloses the opportunity to do a therapeutic self-psychoanalysis of the panicked nature of all identity the groundlessness of such a "transformation" reveals, and crucially, the freedom this realization makes possible. To realize this is to see the genuine freedom posed by the incompleteness within the constraints placed on identity. A third danger is that this understanding of "coming out" may fail to address this key issue that the possibility of gender change shows us that total gender identification is itself impossible, and this essence-less-ness is a realization that can be used to expose in homophobia both what it fears—the contingency or non-naturalness of heterosexuality—and the impossibility of this fear being fixed through pro-hibition or foreclosure. Realizing this enables us to envisage means to over-come the illusions that compel homophobia. Again, when Butler critiques the classic liberal notion of freedom they theorize it as a means to maintain its guiding ideals: freedom, justice, and equality. Moreover, while Butler inherits the rejection of rational autonomy, they develop a reinvigorated theory of agency compatible with the cutting edge of psychological, neuroscientific, evolutionary biology, and other disciplines sensitive to the many forces that predispose action. While traditional liberalisms often explicitly or implicitly ground solidarity and tolerance on accounts of chosen cooperation between distinct agents recognizing either selfish or selfless reasons to coexist and employing their autonomy in response, Butler's model entails a radical, necessary, and participatory inclusivity resting on a recognition of radical interdependence which transforms the question of whether to coexist into the always and already ethical question of how to coexist. Consequently, Butler's theory grounds solidarity in more helpful ways than classical liberalism.

> That my agency is . . . constituted in a sociality I do not fully author does not spell the end to my political claims. It only means that when one makes those claims, one makes them for much more than oneself.[39]

This reinvigoration of solidarity is achieved while retaining the critical insights of deconstruction. Therein Butler warns against the dangers of iden-titarianism from the perspective of a prescribed subversion policed by the call "for a renewal of the value of life."[40]

> The task . . . seems to me to be about distinguishing among the norms and con-ventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict and eviscerate the conditions of life itself . . . What is most important is to cease legislating for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some . . . guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a

livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life or, indeed, social, or literal death.[41]

This pattern continues throughout *Undoing Gender*: its central argument—that gender, rather than expressing identity is a "mode of dispossession"[42]—evidences a commitment to both the recognizable liberal ideals and the critical insights of their earlier work. We can, for a good example, return to a quote which we used in part 2 as provisional evidence of Butler's illiberalism. In a conversation published well into the post 9/11 period, Butler labeled liberal individualism's agency "manic" and tied up with an obsession with "the ego and its mastery"[43] and questioned the idea of selfhood that locates rights within the individual.[44] Furthermore, in rejecting atomic autonomous individualism, Butler rejects liberalism's least plausible tenet while retaining its most valuable core components. Which is to say, where Butler seems to be arguing against the liberal paradigm, closer inspection reveals that the theory of dispossession rests on a deconstruction of liberalism that can revitalize its normative aspirations. For Butler, gender norms do not give us individuality, rather they render us available to others.[45] In virtue of a shift toward letting go of possession and identity, this theory of dispossession critiques a key feature of the liberal approach to sexual liberation: the notion of sexuality as property, as integral. For Butler, to have a body is not to have a possession that you exercise sovereignty over but to be made available in a particular way. This move is repeated in *Frames of War*: "the body does not belong to itself."[46] This is a radical move away from the kind of identity discourses including traditional liberalism and those dominant in contemporary discourse because, for many civil rights movements, autonomy, integrity, and identity are sacrosanct. But Butler couples this radical move with a more robust defense of autonomy than in the early work. Whereas previously Butler described such utility as strategic, in *Undoing Gender*, Butler's adoption is more committed:

> We ask that the state keep its laws off our bodies, and we call for principles of bodily self-defense and bodily integrity to be accepted as political goods, yet it is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social process inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in our social meanings. In a sense to be a body is to be given over to others even as a body is emphatically, one's own, that over which we must claim rights of autonomy. This is as true for the claims made by lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, in favor of sexual freedom, as it is for transsexual and transgender claims to self-determination, as it is for intersex claims to be free of coerced medical, surgical, and psychiatric interventions, as it is for all claims to be free from racist attack, physical and psychical, as it is for claims to reproductive freedom. It is difficult if not impossible to make these claims without recourse to autonomy, and specifically to a sense of bodily autonomy, but bodily autonomy is a lively

paradox. I am not suggesting though we cease to make these claims, we have to, we must, *and I'm not saying that we have to make these claims reluctantly or strategically*, they are part of the normative aspiration of any movement that seeks to maximize the protection of freedoms of sexual and gender minorities and women, defined with the broadest possible compass or racial and ethnic minorities, especially as they cut across all other categories.[47]

The emphasis on dispossession then does not entail dismissing liberal ideals. Indeed, Butler's critique stakes out ground for a normative theory that appeals to and buttresses key liberal themes. Butler appreciates that a robust normative theory useful in buttressing human rights movements must take their insufficiencies into account and aims for an expansion of the notion of the human and for the creation of an inclusive and representative normativity based on the decidedly liberal ideals of democracy, freedom, equality, individual rights, justice, and nonviolence.[48] That this aspiration is liberal can be seen in the further elaborations for political applications grounded in considerations of vulnerability and dispossession. Contra the veiled adherence to ideals in the late middle period, here Butler articulates how this application should function and that its goal is genuinely inclusive ethical geopolitics:

> To grieve and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to a simple passivity or powerlessness. It is, rather to allow oneself to extrapolate from this experience of vulnerability to the vulnerability that others suffer through military incursions, occupations suddenly declared wars, and police brutality. That our survival can be determined by those we do not know and over whom there is no final control means that life is precarious and the politics must consider what forms of social and political organization seek best to sustain precarious lives across the globe.[49]

Here, Butler extends the discussions from the oppression of gender norms to the "justified violence" of war via pernicious norms of national, religious, and ethnic identity and expands the radically interconnected social family beyond national, gender, or ethnic boundaries in a skillful development of compassionate noninvasive globalism and internationalism, which, while invoking the sheltering of life on a global scale, doesn't impose an ethical universalism and thus avoids value imperialism.[50] This "yields the radical potential for new modes of sociality and politics beyond the avid and wretched bonds formed through settler colonialism and expulsion."[51]

Continuing this pattern of deconstructing and revitalizing liberal ideals, *Frames of War* provides a "cynical fortification" of equality and nonviolence. Butler explicates a theory of nonviolence that works from within its psychic and discursive ubiquity arguing for "an ethical prescription against the waging of violence [which] does not disavow or refuse that violence that may

be at work in the production of the subject."[52] What follows is a recognition that the impulse to violence is most likely a consequence of the injunction to suppress one's radical dependence on others. From our position mired in violence, we can nevertheless develop an "aggressive vigilance over aggression's tendency to emerge as violence."[53] Through a critical relationship to the epistemic inegalitarianism whereby norms render some human lives more grievable than others we may embrace the ethical task of apprehending radical equality and nonviolence.[54] Thus, from within the constraints of near-ubiquitous normative violence in moves consistent with the cynical moment, Butler not only overcomes the cynical impasse but does so in such a way that drags from the depths of an open-eyed analysis of psychic, normative, and political power a radically aspirational "critical liberalism" based on a deeply fortified manifesto for an ethic of nonviolence.

## CRITICAL LIBERALISM

Calling Butler's post-9/11 position critical liberalism is useful because it highlights that they inherit the critique of naïve and ideologically compromised liberalism and that they nevertheless attach prime importance to its chief ideals. Butler's usage rests on understanding the nature and necessity of incorporating complex psychological and behavioral tendencies and needs into any theory of human agency: a "new-liberalism" or a "critical liberalism" which nominates a redefinition that can survive the critical insights postmodern intellectual culture has encountered and more importantly, better serve those considered peripheral to the jurisdiction of fair and humane treatment.

There will undoubtedly be objections to this characterization. Objectors may simply cite Butler's reluctance to identify with liberalism.[55] In response, we have distinguished critical liberalism as critical because of its opposition to the naïve liberalism Butler is rightly suspicious of. Objections may also rise from within the terms of this book, that reading Butler in this way requires the existential reading of their work, and that there are insufficient grounds for doing so. There is some support for this objection. While in the later work Butler explicitly critiques the transcendental reading (see the first section of this chapter), it may be argued that they do not straightforwardly claim the existential reading. Perhaps a problematic slippage in Butler between apprehension and recognition, legibility and illegibility, intelligibility and unintelligibility, between the visible and invisible, the grievable and ungrievable remain. So too, it may be argued, in the taxonomical obsession with ranking the violence of epistemic and concrete exclusion. In response, in the later work, the existential reading makes the best sense of Butler's explicitly articulated ethical commitments. The remaining refusal to finally

settle these issues is due to the key Butlerian commitment that follows from the post-structuralist view of discourse as contingent, the performativity of philosophy, and the responsibility of the philosopher to resist the reification of categories potentially complicit in pernicious varieties of normative violence. It is because of this refrain that, if not the transcendental, the Kynical reading remains a useful heuristic for reading later Butler. It also must be said that Butler sustains the radical openness of their normative aspirations partly through contesting the assumptions of traditional epistemologies and ontologies and subverting the foundations of language, reason, and intelligibility. For this reason, a version of the tension that compelled our distinct heuristics remains. This is consistent with Butler's aspiration that discourses useful for democratic politics, equality, and human rights must remain open to critiquing their assumption and entertain a willingness to push on the limits of intelligibility and to destabilize its own foundations so as to reinvigorate, improve, and keep open rather than erode these commitments. Butler, working at the vanguard of a tradition at pains to resist the ossification of normative structures and inauguration of alternative oppression through fidelity to modern or "postmodern" categories retains a degree of rhetorical illusiveness precisely in service of resisting normative violence. Nevertheless, we need only hold onto the existential reading as the most helpful heuristic to capture the aspiration of expanding the field of permitted embodiments and the preoccupation with livability and grievability as definitive of the later Butler. Moreover, on this reading, post-9/11 Butler "owns up" to a critically informed liberalism without relinquishing the commitments that norms are necessarily violent, ubiquitous, requisite, and intractable. Here, instead of lamenting the ubiquity of normative violence or reifying oppressive forces, Butler adopts a preferred normative stance within this framework of constraints. While this may appear perplexing and complicated—the most famous philosopher of normative violence engaging it—it shouldn't be, for throughout their career Butler has remained committed to both the ubiquity of normative violence and its necessary but insufficient causal link with concrete identitarian hatred and violence and its contingency and potential for self-subversion. Indeed, if we read *The Psychic life of Power* as a prolegomenon to this critical liberal normative theory we can accept both the necessary violence of norms and commit to norms that minimize the psychic foreclosures which manifest in persecution, hatred, and violence.

> One must make substantive decisions about what will be a less violent future, what will be a more inclusive population, what will help to fulfill, in substantive terms, the claims of universality and justice that we seek to understand in their cultural specificity and social meaning.[56]

## CONCLUSION

Butler's post-9/11 work maintains their commitment to the necessary violence within materialization and performativity and punitive melancholic subjugation within structurally melancholic subjectivity and addressed the problems therein. But, as well as overcoming these problems and retaining fidelity to the load-bearing argumentative claims of the "cynical moment," Butler's later work also reinvigorates the ideals which guide the entire project. In this way, Butler's post-9/11 serves as an analog for a solution to Extreme Liberal Cynicism which meets our conditions laid out in chapter 5: it is immanent, it follows a clearly articulated normative aspiration in line with its constitutive ideals which it both revitalizes and remains critical of,[57] it retains the rationale behind the irrational disavowal of liberal ideals without disavowing them by sustaining the "tension between (a) expanding existing normative concepts . . . and (b) the call for alternative vocabularies" an antagonism which "keeps the alliance open and suspends the idea of reconciliation as a goal."[58] To quote *Frames of War*, where Butler analyzes the discursive exacerbations of violent predispositions, we have the conclusion to this chapter, indeed this book, in pith:

> The point is not to conclude that cynicism is the only option, but to . . . make better judgments.[59]

## NOTES

1. Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 169.

2. Ibid.

3. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and Abington: Routledge, 2004), 226.

4. Butler, *Frames of War*, 1.

5. Butler, *Frames of War*, 5.

6. Ibid.

7. Butler, *Frames of War*, 15.

8. Butler, *Frames of War*, 20.

9. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 4.

10. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 225.

11. Ibid.

12. All from Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 3–4.

13. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 148, 9, 50.

14. Butler, *Frames of War*, 150.

15. All from Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 3.

16. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 1.

17. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 149.

18. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (London: Verso, 2004), 20.

19. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 21.

20. Ibid.

21. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 5.

22. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 149.

23. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay in Exteriority*, ed. Alphonso Lingus (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

24. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 22.

25. Ibid.

26. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 30.

27. "The more or less existential condition of "precariousness" is thus linked with a more specifically political notion of "precarity," Butler, *Frames of War*, 3.

28. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

29. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 22–23.

30. Without the psychoanalytic architecture of preconscious subjectivation, the machinations whereby unconscious withdrawal falls into the psychic reserve would be an untouchable part of the process of inaugurating norms through iterative sedimentation.

31. Thomas Dumm, "Giving Away, Giving Over: A Conversation with Judith Butler," *Massachusetts Review* 49, no. 1/2 (2008): 95–105.

32. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 43.

33. Ibid.

34. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 23.

35. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 13.

36. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 90.

37. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 91.

38. Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in *Inside Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 309.

39. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 16.

40. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 12.

41. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 8.

42. "When we speak about my sexuality or my gender . . . both are to be understood as modes of being dispossessed, ways of being for another or in deed by critique of another," Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 1.

43. Dumm, "Giving Away, Giving Over," 95–105.

44. Ibid.

45. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 1.

46. Butler, *Frames of War*, 53.

47. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 20. My italics.

48. Butler, *Frames of War*, 52.

49. Butler, *Frames of War*, 23.

50. "It is crucial to understand the workings of gender in global contexts, in transnational formations, not only to see what problems are posed for the term 'gender' but to combat false forms of universalism that service a tacit or explicit cultural imperialism," Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 9.

51. Judith Butler, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2, special isue with the Society for Phenomenonlogy and Existential Philosophy, 134–151.

52. Butler, *Frames of War*, 170.

53. Butler, *Frames of War*, 170.

54. Ibid.

55. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 13. For a discussion on the reemergence of liberalism in contemporary feminist philosophy, see Ann V. Murphy, "Corporeal Vulnerability and the New Liberalism," *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (2011): 575–90.

56. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 225.

57. It cautions against certain liberal values as naïve (individualism and autonomy) yet retains the primary belief in political freedom, justice, equality, human rights, and above all, nonviolence.

58. Butler, *Frames of War*, 148.

59. Butler, *Frames of War*, 159.

# Conclusion

Liberal Cynicism is torn between liberal ideals and the obstacles to their success. These obstacles include critiques of liberalism and the failure to realize liberal ideals. Because of this, it suffers. This pain can compel the Liberal Cynic to extremes, fantasizing invulnerability through disavowing the efficacy of its constitutive ideals.[1] This disavowal is enabled by absolutizing the powers it opposes via reification of hopelessness, assuming intellectual superiority, and by refusing auto-critique. In this picture, cynicism's need to attack ideologies, ideals, and idealisms emanates from the inability to fully disregard its own hopes. Despite serving an immediately ameliorative purpose, this disavowal can leave the cynic unhappy, alienated, hostile, obstinate, and delusional. Thus, it is a failing self-defense mechanism. Extreme Liberal Cynicism, itself on a spectrum, is signposted by failing to avow its ideals, reifying the inefficacy of those ideals, and restricting itself to unsatisfactory or impossible solutions to its pain while vehemently criticizing invested perspectives. This is the hypocrisy and inauthenticity at the heart of Extreme Liberal Cynicism.

At these extremes, Liberal Cynicism is also rationally unjustifiable, as well as intrinsically, and instrumentally harmful. The reification of hopelessness, assumption of trans-idealism, the Cynicalization of ideology critique (the partial and negative reification in the history of ideology critique), and the refusal to engage in self-criticism are irrational. It is intrinsically harmful because it is self-destructive and painful. It is instrumentally harmful in virtue of enabling the problems that compel it. This enablement can be seen on the level of action, where the Extreme Cynic tends to participate in the very system it bemoans, and, through ritualized practical reinforcement and an absolutizing narrative, performatively reifies the illusion of its necessity. It is also instrumentally harmful in virtue of being both ill-equipped to oppose, and vulnerable to subjugation under, Master Cynicism: a condition which couples a disregard for ideals with a disinhibited embrace of power and an offer to assuage cynical pain. The dangers of Liberal Cynicism then are its

painfulness, failing its ideals, and either succumbing to or enabling Master Cynicism. For these reasons, a response is a desideratum. Thankfully, since cynical painfulness also provides the impetus and evinces the resources for Liberal Cynicism to avoid or overcome these extremes, such a response is possible.

To theorize this response, we can turn to Peter Sloterdijk and, first, Judith Butler. Butler's later work stays true to its critical inheritance, therefore remaining immanent, and reinvigorates the values, which while constitutive of the earlier material, were previously disavowed. This is achieved while retaining the tension between ideals and critique, thus retaining the rationale at play in the middle phase's extremely cynical moments. In so doing, Butler's later work, in its relations with the middle and earlier work, meets our conditions for overcoming Extreme Liberal Cynicism. Indeed, within the theoretical frame in which this overcoming consisted lies a model for contesting the pernicious extremes of Liberal Cynicism in general. Per Butler, psychic processes operative in the formation and maintenance of subjective consciousness, or s*ubjectivation*, requires a libidinally invested repression through which the energies once directed toward that which is prohibited provides the impetus for an energetic disavowal. This involves an internalized loss that haunts the ego through a failure to grieve. Butler develops a theory for staying with grief,[2] to thwart this foreclosure and its harmful consequences. Liberal Cynicism also internalized a loss—its constitutive idealism—and underwent a libidinally invested repression through which the energies once directed toward those lost ideals compels a passionate disavowal thereof. Therefore, Butler's theory of breaking the narcissistic circuitry of melancholia may translate to Liberal Cynicism, specifically for short-circuiting the structures whereby liberal pain compels repression. If so, a reckoning with "liberal cynical grief" could bring to the fore the loss: the value and efficacy of its ideals. If it is indeed a psychic defense mechanism whereby painful powerlessness, guilt, and vulnerability are eclipsed by the fantasy of hopelessness, then staying with liberal grief might disengage this function. Therefore, dwelling in cynical grief could allow for an empowering re-affirmation of Liberal Cynicism's constitutive ideals.

Second (from Sloterdijk), our analysis of the structure of Liberal Cynicism and the failure of Sloterdijk's romantic moralizing solution let us conclude that if it is to be persuasive, any solution must draw from, and remain faithful to, cynicism's critical and emotional constitution. We can develop Sloterdijk's proposal to use features immanent to cynicism against its pernicious extremes. By embracing its ignorance as the yardstick from which to mock human knowledge, Sloterdijk's neo-Kynicism invites a self-implicating critique maintaining the ironicization of knowledge but extending it to its assumed intellectual superiority. This could also destabilize the legacy of

Cynicalization and encourage applying cynicism's refusal of naiveté, against its own. Cynical naiveté includes unrealistic expectations for the architectonic coherence, superiority, and success of its values. This contributes to the unbearable nature of Liberal Cynical grief. The repeated and traumatic witnessing of the failures of an absolutized idealism compels the further naiveté of absolute hopelessness. A self-directed neo-Kynical critique of cynical naiveté could both ameliorate the causes of trauma which compelled and enabled the reification of hopelessness and expose it as an emotionally driven response to trauma, an exposé which, because such grounds are generally rejected by cynicism, could motivate a transformative auto-critique.

From Row's appropriation of Sloterdijk's "Kynical re-enlightenment" we saw that, by targeting all as potentially complicit in the problems it seeks to overcome and by acquiring an openness to diverse solutions, an ethically policed cheekiness could disrupt the inertia of argumentative stalemate by avoiding the reduction of opposing views to "false consciousness." This possibility of rescinding on the necessity of agreement and focusing cross-ideological attention on solving the problems the cynic laments, may increase the possibility of a return to dialectic and even of glimpsing the hallmarks of a united vision of justice for which the cynic so desperately yearns. Further grounds for adopting elements within Sloterdijk's solution are that while we concluded that without the policing influence of a normative aspiration, satirical insubordination was a dangerous response to Enlightened False Consciousness, because Liberal Cynicism remains invested in ideals, by contrast, a critique of Liberal Cynicism contains the resources for ethically policing this libidinal release while remaining immanent.

Third, both Sloterdijk and Butler advocate "turning on" the ego. Butler analyzes foreclosures that allow a sense of security to remain during experiences of vulnerability as reducible to a harmful form of ego-preservation. To challenge this dangerous narcissism the ego must be subjected to "super-egoic cruelty."[3] Sloterdijk's cynic wrestles with an unwillingness to reject the notion of a unified self, identified with anti-idealism, and erred on the side of late capitalism: a complex manifest in crude forms of material and psychic self-preservation, reducible to an obstinate egoism. Sloterdijk thus calls for a "liquidation"[4] of the cynical ego. In our analysis, there is a withdrawal into and desperate clinging onto the Liberal Cynical ego compelled by a desire for self-preservation in the face of vulnerability. It stands to reason then, both that the Liberal Cynical ego could benefit from critique, and that Sloterdijk and Butler's theories could be useful in detailing a methodology for mounting one.

Sloterdijk's ego-critique proposes using the insights of existential angst and deconstruction, common bedfellows of the cynic, to reveal the truth of ego-less-ness, an awareness of the precariousness of life, the unknown

possibilities for the future, and our existential interdependence with the Other. Sloterdijk also proposes that satirical self-implicating ego-critique and deconstruction amounts to noncooperation with the discursive forces of materialization, objectification, and identification which can free the cynic from the constraints of a panicked need to uptake the constructed identity categories and idealistic self-designations which both contribute to and are a cause of cynical trauma and repression. But neo-Kynical ego-critique would be different for Liberal Cynicism to what it was for Enlightened False Consciousness because its traumatized self-preservation and fear has not clouded from view the inchoate energies of a magical neo-Kynical yesbody, but rather, the value, efficacy, and responsibilities related to its constitutive idealism. Therefore, neo-Kynical critique of Liberal Cynicism is genuinely immanent and aimed at revealing the efficacy of Extreme Liberal Cynicism's ideals, rather than some ahistorical free-spirited agency.

In later Butler's account of mourning and melancholia, in addition to the desire for the lost love object, a range of desires associated with the ego are also thwarted by loss, specifically the desires for security, autonomy, invulnerability, independence, and the desire for the coherence and transparency of identity. Butler proposed thwarting narcissistic withdrawal by cultivating vulnerability through acknowledging the source of grief, submitting to being transformed by it, and allowing the ideals to be transformed as well. This involves submitting to insecurity, dependency, vulnerability, and uncertainty so that we may respond more healthily to inevitable loss and inaugurate normative cultures that demand less intense foreclosures. Given that a similar range of desires is also thwarted by Liberal Cynicism's loss, cultivating vulnerability could release the pressure to identify with an absolute conception of ideals in a reality in which they flounder, and thereby contribute to weakening the demand for repression. Furthermore, given that Extreme Liberal Cynicism's reification of hopelessness is compelled by the weight of hope's interdependence, a grief-induced acceptance of necessary sociality could further dilute the force to deny and repress, and possibly affirm the necessity of collaboration and compromise, as well as call for the management of expectations. This realization could also help sustain the difficult balance between idealism and ideology critique by submitting to the reality that liberal ideals, while useful, are fallible, incomplete, and dependent. This in turn could further mitigate the painfulness of the sociality of hope through conditioning a greater openness to epistemological pluralism and diversity. This openness to an equally fallible Other could problematize the traumatizing conclusion of liberalism's inefficacy, for the failure of "this" understanding of liberal ideals could be compatible with the potential success of alternative routes to its ends. Therefore, as well as contesting ego-withdrawal and reasserting the value of its ideals, dwelling in cynical grief could ground a collective and

inclusive dialectical critical commitment to equality, freedom, and justice without deciding in advance precisely what they amount to.

Perhaps we still need to say more about how to get the Extreme Cynic to mourn. To this end, we can call on cynical irony. In simultaneously appealing to cynicism's mockery of naiveté and gritty realism, as well as providing cathartic release, by turning minimally hostile critique inward, satirical humor could enable cynicism's vulnerability and grief to enter immediate consciousness. Neo-Kynical satire's willingness to face the world's ills and endure the mockery of hope and disarm the need to evaluate and identify would simultaneously appeal to and challenge cynicism, creating a space for welcoming grief, coupling its open-eyed realism with auto-critique and world-weary and wise willingness to laugh.

We have begun to theorize why the cynic might want to overcome extremes and what needs to happen for a successful overcoming. Put simply, pain is the motivation for an overcoming achieved by grieving in the way liberal hope demands. But perhaps we should say more about what could effectively motivate the Liberal Cynic to swap the easiness of fantasized hopelessness for the painfulness of realistic hope. Since cynical trauma compelled repression, our theory for thwarting it must include a way to make this pain bearable. There is a level at which a willingness to endure the painfulness of idealistic commitments is beyond argumentation, a feature of disposition, perhaps maturity, maybe even strength, but I contend that not only does Liberal Cynicism contain these virtues, also that there are compelling reasons for the cynically inclined to submit to such transformation, avoidance, and revitalization, and methods for making this pain bearable. If successful, this realistic amelioration would defuse cynicism's hostility toward idealism and, no longer a painful reminder of lost innocence, the critical liberal would appreciate liberal naiveté as capable of contributing positively to the changes its idealism seeks. Indeed, a measure of the critical liberal's successful self-discipline would be its ability to value, as well as critique, liberal naiveté.

The first set of reasons to ground and theorize a non-delusional anesthetization of cynical pain revolves around the fact that the value and efficacy of liberal ideals were never successfully foreclosed. This is because, if critique revealed the cynic's hopelessness and absolutism as irrational and the result of a failed foreclosure of its constitutive idealism, these constitutive investments could again become motivating. Furthermore, critiquing the contributions the cynic makes to their own beleaguered condition would in itself destabilize them, and revealing its delusions and germinations in a psycho-emotional imperative, its commitments to truth and independence from false consolation would also motivate the avoidance of its delusional and self-paternalizing extremes.

On a more economical self-interested level, critique may reveal the calmer sincerity of pained liberalism as preferable to the desperate melancholy of unsuccessful foreclosure. Although the causes of cynical pain are non-transparent, it suffers greatly. The Extreme Liberal Cynic is often joyless, insatiably hateful, isolated through narcissistic withdrawal, bitter, pressured by precariousness, and gnawed at by inadmissible guilt. The promise of a preferable pain may be sufficient to provoke agentive participation in overcoming or avoiding cynical extremes, albeit in the context of respectful immanent critique.

Another way our response could abate the unbearable nature of Liberal Cynical pain relates to Sloterdijk's demand that cynicism deconstructs its refusal to auto-critique. Our analysis of cynical pain revealed fear as one condition for this obstinacy, traceable to the fear that auto-critique would lead to losing the only thing cynicism values from within its baron ontology, itself. We developed this as including the fear of enlightenment, an inchoate feeling that it would lead to a loss of self: to death-in-life. As well as removing a cause of the cynical trauma potentially compelling repression, a critique that reveals that cynical self-interrogation does not lead to impasse or abyss could remove this obstacle to auto-critique.

Furthermore, this model also proposes a useful and empowering revitalization of cynicism's ideals and virtues. A willingness to face up to man's inhumanity without the false consolation of naïve hopes or naïve hopelessness could further motivate accepting the painfulness of realistic hope, a pain with which the cynic could proudly identify, thus not just offering an alternative pain, but an amelioration through ennoblement. This ennoblement could be aided by validating, valorizing, and proposing the redeployment of cynical guilt and conscience. As we saw, Sloterdijk and Row diagnose inadmissible guilt compelling the repressive functions of Extreme Liberal Cynicism. Row developed Sloterdijk's notion of shame with which postmodern subjects view their enlightenment inheritance and its complicity in injustice. The validation and valorization of which is straightforward: the guilt around enlightenment liberalism's complicity with colonialism and imperialism is simultaneously a call to rethink the enlightenment, to see how it and we have failed tolerance, equality, democracy, dignity, and human rights. The cynical conscience which casts doubt on all ideals is simultaneously a call to retain a critical distance concerning the totality and actionability of any ideals as well as to adopt an open-minded dialectic concerning their future. The perennial guilt that my actions and my ideals don't always match up, is a call to correct this. Concerning redeploying cynical guilt, the repressed desire for the realization of liberal ideals is preserved in Liberal Cynical pain, which is to say, the pain compelling the repression of liberal ideals is simultaneously a reminder of their efficacy. This model of guilt draws from both Sloterdijk and Butler

who, albeit within very different projects, propose a productive use of guilt. Both develop guilt into recognition of shared precariousness and vulnerability—both conditions for cynical repression—into an invitation to apprehend the suffering of all. Such an appropriation can be theorized in relation to psychoanalytic themes familiar to this book. In our comparison of Freud and Butler's accounts of mourning and melancholia, we saw that while for Freud, guilt is a manifestation of desire thwarted by social prohibitions internalized into the super-ego manifest in the form of conscience punishing the ego; we saw that for Butler, guilt preserves the desire as well as the prohibition, and as such is ambivalent. Our redeployment of cynical liberal guilt adopts Butler's approach. On this model, valorizing cynical guilt might aid its entrance into consciousness, and thereby provide additional impetus for overcoming the extremes of Liberal Cynicism.

We may also validate, valorize, and redeploy cynical fantasies. Compelled by an inability to disregard and eradicate pain sown by latent ideals, cynical fantasy is the means through which the cynic absolutizes the superiority and inefficacy of its constitutive idealism and other potential liberations. As we saw in our literary phenomenology of popular cynicism in chapter 1, at extremes, cynical fantasy contributes to sustaining a subjectivity void of social responsibility. Nevertheless, our critique revealed that there is a logic and compulsion within Extreme Liberal cynical fantasy which shows that the Extreme Cynic is not exclusively irresponsible or even unhealthy, this respect could soften the blow to the cynical ego which our critique demands if it is to be persuasive. Concerning valorization and redeployment, fantasy can play a vital role in overcoming the problems in which it is complicit. Resources again come from Butler, for whom fantasy signposts "what reality forecloses."[5] Following Butler, the skillful appropriation of fantasy calls for rejecting it where it contains conceptual content (for example, Benna's naïve love, Susan's negative reifications, and Sloterdijk's romantic utopianism), and instead, retaining it as a space holder for the bare possibility of an improved situation, an optimistic relationship to an avowed opacity: "Fantasy is what establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home."[6] For the Liberal Cynic, the "elsewhere" yearning to come home is a world in which qualified liberalism succeeds. A *decynicalized* liberal cynical fantasy would amount to the courage to imagine an improved global political situation guided by its critically open ideals and policed by the constant reminder that our knowledge is incomplete and that this vision is merely a signpost of a reality it cannot foresee. In this way, fantasy could function as a useful cynical conscience, reminding us to be epistemically humble in our aims to realize liberal ideals, while imagining their increased influence and remaining open to what they amount to and entail. Butler explains that this concept of fantasy as epistemic humility is

"essential to the project of international human rights discourse and politics"[7] and part of the "task of a radical democratic theory."[8] In contrast to the liberal cynical fantasy of the necessary failure of liberalism, critical liberal fantasy would hold the space open for its possible success:

> That we cannot predict or control . . . does not mean that we cannot struggle for the realization of certain values, democratic, and nonviolent, international, and anti-racist. The point is only that to struggle for those values is precisely to avow that one's own position is not sufficient to elaborate the spectrum.[9]

In sum, the Critique of Extreme Cynicism coupled with the libidinal release of neo-Kynical cheekiness, a Butlerian reckoning with grief, and the skillful reappropriations of its complex desires and losses could compel the cynically inclined to resist fatalism and embrace an ennobling self-transformation, upholding a critical commitment to reinvigorating and working for its constitutive ideals. This could transform a condition beset by painful, destructive, and isolating delusions into the warmhearted and heartbroken honesty of critical liberalism in a world that really needs it. The painfulness of Liberal Cynicism evidences the failure of illiberalism and contains the resource to develop an inclusive evolving conception of a better alternative: it is a gift, a source of dignity and emancipatory resistance in the face of that which compels it: injustice, violence, inequality, intolerance, reductive materialism, irrationalism, imperialism, hatred, and so on. Within Extreme Liberal Cynicism then, a saving power grows.

## NOTES

1. This relates to something of a contentious issue running through this work, the question as to whether and how psychoanalysis can be applied to cynicism. Sloterdijk deals with this issue, perhaps intuiting a concern I share, defending against the objection that he, as perhaps I, mistakenly offer a non-psychoanalytic analysis of a condition that requires one, or a psychoanalytic account of a condition that remains entirely within the domain of conscious first-person experience. In a discussion on pages 404–8, Sloterdijk references January–February and March–April 1933 issues of the journal *Psychoanalytische Bewegung*, specifically the article in two parts, *Zur Psychoanalyse des Zynikers*, (I and II), by Edmund Bergler. Bergler defines cynicism as unconscious in all but four of its sixty-four varieties, and as a "grave neuroses." Per Sloterdijk, cynicism, for Bergler, is a means by which people with extremely strong emotional ambivalences psychically discharge and thus stands on the same level as classic neurotic mechanisms such as hysteria, melancholy, and paranoia. For Bergler, through hostility to both itself and others as well as through humor, cynicism escapes the world it feels it must hate and acts out infantile tendencies. In Sloterdijk's

description, Bergler's "cynicism belongs to the dynamic of cultural liberation struggles and the social dialectics of values" and "is one the most important methods of working through ambivalences in a culture," Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 407. Therein Sloterdijk criticizes the notion of cynicism as unconscious. Specifically, Sloterdijk argues that the "mechanisms of the cynic" are transparent to the cynic, this is the enlightened part of Enlightened False Consciousness, such that "the unconscious scarcely has to make any effort," ibid. I find myself between these views. As my analysis in chapter 1 hopefully shows, I disagree with Sloterdijk that cynicism is entirely transparent and that it must function above the veil of unconscious mechanism. However, I agree with three key claims Sloterdijk makes on Bergler's behalf: (1) that cynicism attacks itself and the world in order to solve an inner conflict and attempts an escape through humor, (2) that in its adolescent form with which this book does not deal, it "acts out its infantile tendencies" and most crucially, (3) that through hostility and masochism, cynicism functions as a means by which strong emotional ambivalences psychically discharge. However, I agree with Sloterdijk that "the conscious participation of the ego in objective immoralism, and the obvious fragmentation of morals explain the matter much more effectively than does the depth-psychological theory" (407). I also believe that the structure of cynicism can be made transparent to the cynic instead of/as well as by a qualified analyst: "the 'ice-dogs' still have the energy to bark and still possess enough bite to want to make things clear" (408). This belief requires justification: although adopting terms and moves informed by Butler's Freudianism, my conception of liberal melancholy needn't extend to the neurotic depths of Butler's Freudian melancholia (i.e., beyond the reach of self-therapy). This is for three reasons: (1) Because cynicism is rarely central to one's identity. This is evinced by the fact that cynicism is an intermittent state of consciousness, it can take specific referents, and is compatible with non-cynical attitudes (one can be cynical about politics but not love, or visa-versa). Therefore, cynicism needn't be the kind of psychic structure constitutive of subjectivity which is often the condition for the obliviousness to pathologies that render people incapable of self-help. Consequently, cynicism need not exclude self-analysis (there may be cases where cynicism is constitutive of identity and therefore beyond the scope of conscious transparency, this is more likely to be associated with Master Cynicism, whose duplicity, through repression, manifests in the comfort of pathological lie). Agreeing with this line of argument, Sharon Stanley argues that we should "conceive of cynicism as tactic rather than an exhaustive identity," Sharon Stanley, *The French Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Cynicism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 17–18. (2) Because the transparency of Liberal Cynical pain is a sign both of its complicity in psychic mechanisms related to the unconscious and the conscious, it is also the sign of its susceptibility to the ameliorative efforts at both the conscious and unconscious. For a crude but hopefully helpful analogy the stereotypical homophobe does not experience grief concerning the lost homosexual desire let alone the cause of the grief, nor do they tend to self-identify as homophobic. This is because on Butler's model, they suffer from a melancholia which is the result of unspeakable loss manifesting in unethical disregard or violent hostility. Although panicked by those embracing its disavowed desires the suffering is

not conscious. By contrast even while the cause of cynical pain may remain hidden, the pain is not. Furthermore, the cynic is usually comfortable diagnosing themselves as cynical and is often aware of its harmfulness. It is for this distinct phenomenological difference that this "condition" need not require psychoanalysis, and is ripe for guided self-transformation. (3) Liberal Cynicism is accessible to self-consciousness, if not consciousness in general, because of the nature of the trauma that compels it. Although I argue against Sloterdijk's solely intellectual cynicism caused by the legacy of critique and instead hold that worldly disappointments are crucial, Liberal Cynical grief is distinct to more immediate pain. To put it another way, the Palestinian father who lost children to both Israeli military and Hamas attacks is cynical about politics in a way beyond the scope of my analysis. That trauma is profound and immediate and if it compels pathological complexes, these are to be dealt with by highly psycho-analytically, psychologically, and neuropsychologically trained medical professionals. By contrast, for Liberal Cynics their trauma is less direct. The trauma of being invested in generally failing ideals tends to be indirect and mediated. Indeed, as we have tried to make clear, Liberal Cynicism is conditioned by ideology critique, a privilege of the highly educated and therefore Liberal Cynics are less likely to have the justifiable "depth-cynicism" of our mourning Palestinian father. Since the trauma of Liberal Cynicism is indirect, the requirements for its alleviation are similarly superficial and accessible to the consciousness whose repression of liberal ideals operates comparatively superficially. This picture allows both for cynicisms functioning at depths requiring professional psychiatric care and the kinds of adolescent cynicisms functioning at such superficial levels of trauma where a change in weather could be sufficient for their "overcoming." This book aims somewhere between these poles, at a condition which I argue, is nevertheless prevalent among the intellectual liberals whom, I hope, will find this analysis interesting and ideally liberatory.

2. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and Abington: Routledge, 2004).

3. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (London: Verso, 2004), 138.

4. Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 379.

5. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 29.

6. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 217.

7. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 36.

8. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 225.

9. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 3.

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# Index

# About the Author

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