

Theory and History of Literature

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Critique of Cynical Reason

Peter Sloterdijk

Translation by Michael Eldred

Foreword by Andreas Huyssen

Theory and History of Literature, Volume 40



University of Minnesota Press
Minneapolis
London

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Originally published as *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, 2 vols. Copyright © 1983 by Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main.

Fifth printing 2001

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Published by the University of Minnesota Press
111 Third Avenue South, Suite 290, Minneapolis, MN 55401-2520
<http://www.upress.umn.edu>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sloterdijk, Peter, 1947-
Critique of cynical reason.

(Theory and history of literature ; v. 40)
Translation of: *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*.
Includes index.

1. Cynicism. 2. Civilization, Modern-20th century.

I. Title. II. Series.

B809.5.S5813 1987 149 86-24918

ISBN 0-8166-1585-3

ISBN 0-8166-1586-1 (pbk.)

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Foreword: The Return of Diogenes as Postmodern Intellectual

Andreas Huyssen

The entire kynical mode of life adopted by Diogenes was nothing more or less than a product of Athenian social life, and what determined it was the way of thinking against which his whole manner protested. Hence it was not independent of social conditions but simply their result; it was itself a rude product of luxury.

Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, sec. 195

For the happiness of the animal, that thorough kynic, is the living proof of the truth of kynicism.

Nietzsche, *Untimely Observations*, 2, sec. 1

Reduced to his smallest dimension, the thinker survived the storm.

Brecht, *Das Badener Lehrstück vom Einverständnis*

I

Some two hundred years after the publication of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), a polemically written philosophical essay of nearly 1,000 pages, disrespectfully entitled *Critique of Cynical Reason*, captured the imagination and the passions of readers in Germany. Contrary to Kant's philosophical treatise, which, over a hundred years after its appearance, still made Musil's Torless sweat with fear and nausea, Peter Sloterdijk's treatise became an immediate success offering German intellectuals a master lesson in the pleasures of the text. Within only a few months over 40,000 copies had been sold, and the liberal feuilletons outdid each other in heaping praise on the author by comparing him to Nietzsche, Spengler, Schopenhauer. Since much of this praise focused on Sloterdijk's critique of the Enlightenment, popular in West Germany since the conservative *Tendenzwende* of the 1970s, the Left responded by trying to relegate Sloterdijk's essay to the dustbin of history, as a rotten ware of late capitalist decline. Both readings sucked Sloterdijk's text back into the ideological and political confrontations of contemporary West German culture that Sloterdijk actually

I wish to thank Martin Schwab for suggestions and criticisms.

proposed to sidestep, and thus they missed important aspects of the book's challenge to the status quo. Ironically, many of the negative responses were reminiscent of an earlier conservative German *Kulturkritik* that held that anything successful could not possibly be any good and required ponderous seriousness of anything to be taken seriously. Thus the tongue-in-cheek reference to Kant in the title was predictably turned against the *Critique of Cynical Reason*, and it was attacked as simplistic, faddish, and pretentious, anti-theoretical, regressively irrational, and politically reactionary. There was controversy, and controversy, as any cynical observer of the culture industry will be quick to note, is the sine qua non of critical success.

But the success of Sloterdijk's essay has deeper roots. It has a lot to do with the fact that despite the recent revival of conservatism in Western countries, the old dichotomies of Left vs. Right, progress vs. reaction, rationality vs. irrationality have lost much of their explanatory power, moral appeal, and political persuasiveness. In its focus on a new type of postenlightened schizocynicism that remains immune to traditional forms of ideology critique, Sloterdijk's book articulates the pervasive malaise and discontent in contemporary culture that despite differences in local traditions and politics, is as much a reality today in the United States as in West Germany or, for that matter, in France. First and foremost, the *Critique of Cynical Reason* should therefore be read as an attempt to theorize a central aspect of that culture we have come to call postmodern, as an intervention in the present aimed at opening up a new space for a cultural and political discourse.

What then is Sloterdijk's project? The dismissive comparison with Kant, voiced by some German critics, is as much beside the point as the facile elevation of Sloterdijk to a Nietzsche of the late twentieth century. While he is strongly indebted to a Nietzschean kind of *Kulturkritik* that focuses on the nexus of knowledge and power, he is not ready to forget the affinity between Nietzsche's subtle "cynicism of self-disinhibition" (chapter 3) and the brutal politics of imperialism, later fascism. Neither does he share Kant's intention to subject reason to critique in order to open up the way toward the final goal of all rational speculation, the advancement of science, progress, and emancipation. If anything, his posture is anti-Kantian in that it rejects all master narratives (with a Brechtian twist, Sloterdijk calls them *Grosstheorieri*) of reason of which Kant's idealism and metaphysics is certainly a major example. The title's reference to the Kantian critiques makes sense only as a critical gesture.

However, there is another sense of the Kantian project that Michel Foucault has emphasized in an attempt to posit Kant against the Cartesian tradition, and which might describe Sloterdijk's project quite accurately. In his essay "The Subject and Power," Foucault had this to say about Kant:

When in 1784 Kant asked, *Was heisst Aufklärung?*, he meant, What's going on right now? What's happening to us? What is this world, this period, this precise moment in which we are living?

Or in other words: What are we? as *Aujkldrer*, as part of the Enlightenment? Compare this with the Cartesian question: Who am I? I, as a unique but universal and unhistorical subject? I, for Descartes, is everyone, anywhere at any moment? But Kant asks something else: What are we? in a very precise moment of history. Kant's question appears as an analysis of both us and our present.¹

I think that we may read Sloterdijk with maximum benefit if we read him in the same way Foucault read Kant's programmatic essay. What is at stake in the *Critique of Cynical Reason* is not a universal history of cynicism (as such the book would be seriously flawed), but rather a more limited investigation of the role of cynicism and its antagonist kynicism for contemporary critical intellectuals. Sloterdijk sees cynicism as the dominant operating mode in contemporary culture, both on the personal and institutional levels, and he suggests reviving the tradition of kynicism, from Diogenes to Schweik, as a counterstrategy, as the only form of subversive reason left after the failures and broken promises of ideology critique in the tradition of Western Marxism. By focusing on cynicism as a central feature of the postmodern condition in the 1970s and 1980s and by searching for strategies to resist it, Sloterdijk attempts to theorize that which has often remained submerged in the recent debate about modernity and postmodernity: the pervasive sense of political disillusionment in the wake of the 1960s and the pained feeling of a lack of political and social alternatives in Western societies today. After all, the 1960s in West Germany—against the arguments of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—were once labeled a second expanded enlightenment that seemed to promise a major and long-lasting realignment in the country's political culture based on what Sloterdijk calls, with a sense of loss, the "public dispute about true living" (Preface). In the German context where illiberalism and reaction are usually perceived to be responsible for the march into fascist barbarism, the notion of *Aufklärung* carried a great potential of Utopian hopes and illusions with it at that time, both in relation to radical social and cultural change anticipated for the future and with regard to Germany's attempts to come to terms with its fascist past. Cynicism and resignation are therefore indeed dangers for a generation that had its formative political experiences in the 1960s and that has since then seen its hopes not so much dashed as crumble and fade away. The situation is even worse for the subsequent generation, the no-future kids and dropouts (*Aussteiger*) of the 1970s who were too young then to feel anything but contempt today for the 1960s nostalgia of their elders who have the jobs, while they face diminished opportunities and an increasingly bleak labor market. While Sloterdijk's analysis is rooted in his perceptions of German culture, it seems fairly clear that the German case of political disillusionment, cyni-

cism, and an atrophied trust in the future has parallels in other Western countries today. In a certain sense, the growth of cynicism during the 1970s actually provided the cultural soil for the revival of the ideological conservatism of the 1980s, which has filled the void left by the post-1960s disillusionment with a simulacrum of homely old values.

Thus Sloterdijk perceives a universal, diffuse cynicism as the predominant mindset of the post-1960s era, and he takes the cynic not as the exception but rather as an average social character, fundamentally asocial, but fully integrated into the work-a-day world. Psychologically he defines him as a borderline melancholic able to channel the flow of depressive symptoms and to continue functioning in society despite constant nagging doubts about his pursuits. I suspect that Sloterdijk's cynicism is less widespread than he might want to claim. But as an analysis of the prevailing mindset of a generation of middle-aged male professionals and intellectuals, now in their late thirties to mid-forties and in increasingly influential positions, Sloterdijk's observations are perceptive and to the point. And who could resist the brilliance of an aphorism such as the following, which pinpoints this new unhappy sensibility:

Cynicism is enlightened false consciousness. It is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and unsuccessfully. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buffered, (chapter 1)

Given this modernization of false consciousness, the old strategies of the Enlightenment—from the public exposure of lies to the benign correction of error to the triumphant unveiling of a structurally necessary false consciousness by ideology critique—will no longer do. They will no longer do not only because the false consciousness they attack is already reflexively buffered, nor simply because ideology critique in the Marxian tradition, that once most radical heir to the Enlightenment, has mutated into a theory of political legitimation in the Soviet bloc. Even more objectionable to Sloterdijk is the subjective side of ideology critique, which always rests on a problematic reification and depersonalization of the opponent in the first place: enlightenment as a war of consciousness aimed at annihilating the opponent. Thus the focus on the place of subjectivity in ideology critique reveals how the dialectic of domination and exclusion was always already inscribed into the enlightenment, vitiating its claims to universal emancipation. In this far-reaching critique of the deadly mechanisms of ideology critique, Sloterdijk actually continues in an important tradition of Western Marxism that reaches back to Marx himself: the critique of reification. However, he gives it a Nietzschean twist by focusing not on reification through the commodity form

(which he accepts in a weaker, nontotalizing version), but on reification of self and other in presumably enlightened discourse practices.

One of the consequences of Sloterdijk's concern with the subjective effects of cynical reason is that he attempts to address the creeping political disillusionment of the post-1960s era on an existential, subjective level rather than disembodimenting it into the realm of universal norms or agonistic, free-floating language games without subjects. One need not be fully convinced of Sloterdijk's somatic strategies for overcoming this enlightened false consciousness to see that his analysis of the post-1960s intellectual works as a productive irritant both against the defenders of a Habermasian modernity and against the advocates of a Nietzschean schizo-postmodernity. By addressing the problem of cynical disillusionment head-on and by articulating the basic intellectual problem of our time as that of an "enlightened false consciousness" rather than attacking or defending enlightened rationality, Sloterdijk's essay cuts across the false oppositions, accusations, and counteraccusations that have marred the modernity-postmodernity debate, pushing it ever deeper into a cul-de-sac. From an American perspective one might say that Sloterdijk offers us a sustained polemical reflection on a modernity gone sour and a postmodernity unable to stand on its own feet without constant groping back to what it ostensibly opposes. Rather than seeing enlightenment as the source of all evil in a perspective which became prevalent in France in the post-68 era or condemning the poststructuralist critique of reason as inescapably irrationalist and conservative, Sloterdijk engages the hostile camps in a dizzying dance in which frozen positions are productively set in motion and in which a new figuration of postmodernity emerges, a figuration that seems both more promising and less exclusive than most of the current accounts would seem to permit.

Sloterdijk's questions would then read something like this: How can intellectuals be *Aufklärer* at this precise moment in history? What has happened to enlightenment, to the ideal of rational discourse since the 1960s, and how do we evaluate the strong antirationalist impulse visible in all Western countries today? How does the political and cultural experience of the 1960s stack up against the catastrophic history of the earlier twentieth century? Was the New Left's belief in a regeneration of the enlightenment perhaps naive in the first place? How and in what form can the values of the Enlightenment tradition be sustained in an age that has become more and more disillusioned with the project of enlightened modernity? What forces do we have at hand against the power of instrumental reason and against the cynical reasoning of institutionalized power? How do we define the subject of *Aufklärung* today? How can one remain an *Aufklärer* if the Enlightenment project of disenchanting the world and freeing it from myth and superstition must indeed be turned against enlightened rationality itself? How can we reframe the problems of ideology critique and of subjectivity, falling neither for the armored ego of Kant's epistemological subject nor for the schizosubjectivity without identity, the free flow of libidinal energies proposed by Deleuze and

Guattari? Where in history do we find examples that would anticipate our intellectual dilemma? How can historical memory help us resist the spread of cynical amnesia that generates the simulacrum side of postmodern culture? How can we avoid paralysis, the feeling of history at a standstill that comes with Critical Theory's negative dialectic as much as with the positing of a carceral continuum that occupies central space in recent French accounts of *posthistoire*?

No doubt, Sloterdijk wants to be an *Aufklärer*. He advocates a type of enlightenment that is enlightened about itself. He rejects the new fundamentalism of conservatives and neoconservatives, *and* he criticizes the universalist claims of the classical Enlightenment. Thus he accepts certain important tenets of the post-structuralist critique of the Enlightenment, especially in its Foucaultian version. But he never falls for the facile and fashionable collapsing of reason and totalitarianism, nor for the obsessive French focus, since the 1970s, on incarceration and *le monde concentrationnaire*, the world as concentration camp. (In a curious way this concern of French intellectuals displays the same fixation on the past of which they accuse German Left intellectuals whose obsession with fascism allegedly blinds them to the threat posed by the Soviet Union and the world of the Gulag.) Just as Sloterdijk rejects the timeworn Lukacsian argument that all the roads of irrationality lead into fascism, he also disagrees with "the French position." He refuses to accept the surreptitiously teleological notion that all enlightenment ends in the Gulag or in a concentration camp, which is itself nothing but the reverse of the myth of revolution and emancipation that prevailed in the self-understanding of French intellectuals from Voltaire via Zola to Sartre. To the German critic who was nurtured on Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse in the 1960s, such a one-dimensional proposition could only appear as the dialectic of enlightenment revisited—except that contrary to much of the French Nietzscheanism of the 1970s, Horkheimer and Adorno always held on to a substantive notion of reason and truth that remained, in Kantian terms, the condition of possibility of Critical Theory itself.

While Sloterdijk takes freely from both Critical Theory and poststructuralism, his position remains crucially ambivalent in that he has as much trouble with the "truth" of Critical Theory as with the total dissolution of truth, reason, and subjectivity in certain radical forms of poststructuralism. His text oscillates provocatively between Frankfurt and Paris. At times it appears to blend Critical Theory with poststructuralism; at others it rather seems to operate like a collage of various theoretical *objets trouvés*. At any rate, Sloterdijk's intention is to move beyond the propositions of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, *and* to evade the post-Nietzschean compulsion to collapse knowledge and power. In that aim—and *only* in the aim—he might be said to approach Habermas, whose model of consensus and free dialogue he accepts as a "healing fiction" (chapter 2) but rejects as an adequate description of the post-1960s status quo. In an era of widespread diffuse cynicism in which the traditional subject of critical knowledge and all central per-

spectives of critique seem to have been pulverized, Sloterdijk constructs a new model of localized conflict that seeks literally to embody another reason, another enlightenment, another subjectivity. He proposes to turn the disillusionment with enlightened modernity away from melancholy and cynicism and to make lost illusions productive for an enlightened thought on another level. He wants to achieve this goal by reclaiming a tradition of rationality from which the modern scientific enlightenment, much to its detriment, has cut itself loose: the tradition of kynicism, embodied in Diogenes, who privileged satirical laughter, sensuality, the politics of the body, and a pleasure-oriented life as forms of resistance to the master narratives of Platonic idealism, the values of *me polis*, and the imperial claims of Alexander the Great.

II

Nevertheless, Sloterdijk's starting point remains Adorno and Horkheimer's pessimistic work and its radical critique of instrumental reason and identity metaphysics. The *Critique of Cynical Reason* could indeed be read as a postmodern pastiche of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a pastiche, however, that retains the memory of the pain and anger of Adorno's melancholy science and that sympathizes with the rejection of a patriarchal world in which reason has become a strategic tool for the domination of inner and outer nature. If it is pastiche, however, it is not so in the sense that Jameson has defined as one of the major modes of postmodern cultural production.² Jameson sees pastiche as imitating a peculiar mask, as speech in a dead language, as a neutral practice of mimicry that has abandoned the satirical impulse still inherent in parody, that major stylistic strategy of modernism out of which pastiche is said to evolve. And he goes on to claim that producers of culture today "have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture."³ Jameson clearly sees postmodern pastiche negatively as a "random cannibalization of all styles of the past," and much of postmodernism can indeed be described in this way. In fact, even Sloterdijk could be said to cannibalize a number of different styles and modes of expression—the polished aphorism, the anecdote, the suggestive style of the *feuilleton*, satire, serious philosophical discourse, the discourses of literary and intellectual history—mixing them in a kind of patchwork that prevents the emergence of a unitary style in the traditional modernist sense and that evades the requirements of a rigorous philosophical discourse.

But this is also the point where Sloterdijk's pastiche is no longer grasped by Jameson's characterizations. The *Critique of Cynical Reason* is not "blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs."⁴ Sloterdijk's pastiche is endowed, from the very beginning, with a combative impulse, and his text asserts a notion of an embodied subjectivity. Memory and anamnesis keep it from going blind, and the

kynical impulse of *Frechheit* makes this pastiche come alive as self-assertive body. It is a philosophical pastiche that remains self-consciously satirical and never denies its substantive ties to the tradition of literary modernism and the historical avant-garde. Rather than postmodern in Jameson's sense, suspended, as it were, in the gap between signifier and signified, Sloterdijk's relationship to the discourses of various disciplines and media is Brechtian, even though without Brecht's Leninist politics, in that it has definite purposes, makes contingent arguments, and uses traditions critically to its own advantage. In this sense, Sloterdijk's work could be claimed for a critical and adversarial postmodernism, a postmodernism of resistance, as some critics have called it.

At the same time, Sloterdijk's text is postmodern in yet another sense. The *Critique of Cynical Reason* lacks the metaphysical backlighting that still hovers on the horizon of Adorno's critique of the metaphysics of reason, and that in general haunts much of literary and philosophical modernism. Thus in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, mat central text of philosophical high modernism, the struggle of reason against mythic nature that brings about the inescapably fatal reversal of reason into myth, of self-preservation into self-denial, is itself a metaphysical figure. Adorno's relation to metaphysics as the pretext of his critical work is as emphatically strong as Derrida's two decades later. Both Critical Theory and deconstruction, primarily through their readings of Nietzsche, actually ground a whole philosophy of history in their ideas about the rise and fall of metaphysics. But as Sloterdijk says, this notion of a breakdown, of a collapse, is today inadequate: "Metaphysical systems do not 'fall,' but fade, seep away, stagnate, become boring, old hat, unimportant, and improbable." (chapter 10, n. 16).

Instead of a totalizing unraveling of enlightenment and Western metaphysics (interpreted along the lines, say, of "phallogocentrism") or of an equally one-sided normative defense of enlightened modernity (interpreted along the lines of communicative reason), Sloterdijk gives us an account of the operations of enlightened reason in history as a series of combative constellations without ground, without beginning and without telos: enlightenment as the eternal return of the same. As he tries to avoid any teleological account of the history of enlightenment, he presents us with the ineradicable return of the struggle between opposing consciousnesses: the cynicism of power and its institutions (in the realms of politics, the military, religion, knowledge, sexuality, and medicine) vs. the kynical revolt from below, which responds to the cynicism of domination with satirical laughter, defiant body action, or strategic silence. Sloterdijk's description of cynicism and kynicism, repression and resistance, as a constant of history can be criticized as lacking historical specificity, but given the parameters of the current debate on postmodernity it has the advantage of making the fear of total closure suddenly appear to be as delusive and irrelevant as the hope for total emancipation, the first actually being nothing so much as a binary reversal of the latter, a reversal of the messianic millenarianisms of the early twentieth century into the

catastrophic dystopias of our own time. Sloterdijk would be the last to forget the experiences of twentieth-century totalitarianisms; after all, his thought is grounded in the tortured insights of Critical Theory and cannot be accused of amnesia. But he does refuse the metaphysics of totality that still characterizes so much of contemporary European thought, even if in the form of radical negation. He refuses it in order to salvage the discourse of emancipation, shorn of its universalist claims and brought down to a localizable human dimension. With Adorno, Sloterdijk insists that one of the main problems with the Enlightenment was its inability to include the body and the senses in its project of emancipation. He therefore attempts to reconstitute *Aufklärung* on the limited basis of what he calls physiognomic thought, embodied thought, arguing for enlightenment as *Selbsterfahrung* rather than self-denial. The mythic model for the kind of somatic anarchism he advocates is the Greek kynic Diogenes, the plebeian outsider inside the walls of the city who challenged state and community through loud satirical laughter and who lived an animalist philosophy of survival and happy refusal.

But let's make no mistake. We are not just facing a return of the tired existentialist notion of the individual vs. society, the outsider vs. the group, the margin vs. the center. Nor is Sloterdijk's resurrection of Diogenes merely a nostalgia for the protest strategies of the 1960s shorn of their collective dimension and reduced to a kind of Stirnerian philosophy of the individual, self-identical body. Sloterdijk fully grasps the dialectic of exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, body and power, and the reproach, often leveled against him, that he constructs a merely binary opposition between cynicism and kynicism simply misses the mark. After all, the cynic as disillusioned and pessimistic rationalist is as far beyond the belief in idealism, stable values, and human emancipation as the kynic is. Thus rather than positing a binary opposition of cynicism vs. kynicism, Sloterdijk postulates the split within the cynical phenomenon itself, which pits the cynical reason of domination and self-domination against the kynic revolt of self-assertion and self-realization. He mobilizes the kynical potential of the Diogenes tradition against a prevailing cynicism that successfully combines enlightenment with resignation and apathy. But it is precisely the moment of a disillusioned enlightenment in cynicism itself that—and this must be Sloterdijk's hope—might make it susceptible to the temptation of kynical self-assertion. Here it becomes clear that Sloterdijk's Diogenes strategy is directed primarily at those who still suffer, however subliminally, from enlightened false consciousness, not at the real cynics of domination or at those leaders of the contemporary world who mistake their own cynical politics for a return to old values, a form of unenlightened cynicism to which Sloterdijk pays scant attention. Sloterdijk is right in reminding us that the domination through instrumental or cynical reason can never be total and that the masochism of refusal or the melancholy about an irrevocable loss of happiness, that double heritage of Critical Theory, has today lost its offensive potential and reinforces the enlightened false consciousness it should help to dismantle.

Thus Sloterdijk answers Adorno's melancholy science with a kind of *Erheiterungsarbeit*, a "work that entertains" (Preface) and is based on what he calls the "embodying of reason" (Preface). He carnivalizes the frozen landscape of negative dialectics, and mobilizes the kynical body of Diogenes against the cunning of Odysseus, that master-cynic of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* who pays the price of self-denial in order to survive in his struggles with the mythic powers, the Cyclops and the Sirens. Where Adorno's Odysseus embodies what Sloterdijk calls "self-splitting in repression" (chapter 8), the ultimately unhappy consciousness of the modern cynic, Diogenes comes to represent the "self-embodiment in resistance" (chapter 8), an enlightened affirmation of a laughing, excreting, and masturbating body that actually undercuts the modern notion of a stable identity, attacks the armored, self-preserving, and rationalizing ego of capitalist culture, and dissolves its strict separations of inside and outside, private and public, self and other.

On one level Sloterdijk's return to the kynic body may appear as a merely adolescent and regressive gesture whose potential for effective resistance is a priori contained and even vitiated by the way in which sexuality, the body, the corporeal have been deployed, instrumentalized, and co-opted by the contemporary culture industry. If, as Sloterdijk would have to be the first to admit, the body itself is a historical construct, how can the mere impudence of the postmodern Diogenes hope to break through the layers of reification and power inscriptions which Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault have so cogently analyzed? And how would Sloterdijk counter a Foucaultian claim that the resistance of the self-conscious body is produced by the culture of cynicism itself as a regenerating and legitimating device? It is indeed questionable to what extent Diogenesian protest gestures could be more effective politically than traditional ideology critique combined with organized mass protests and group politics. Unless, of course, Diogenes's aim were to create a "counterpublic sphere," a kind of *Gegenöffentlichkeit* as Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge have theorized it. Precisely this broader dimension is absent from Diogenes's politics.

But the return to the body in Sloterdijk is never an end in itself, and we may have to look for its politics on another level. Enlightenment as *Selbsterfahrung* through the body tries to unearth a register of subjectivity buried in the civilizing process that produced the Western self-identical subject over the centuries. To that rational male subject, whose ultimate manifestation for Sloterdijk is the nuclear bomb and its identity of self-preservation and self-destruction, Sloterdijk opposes an alternative subjectivity, a vision of an actual softening and liquefying of subjects:

Our true self-experience in original Nobodiness remains in this world buried under taboo and panic. Basically, however, no life has a name. 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. Its life soil is the mentally alert body, which we should call not *nobody* but *yesbody* and which is able to develop in the course of individuation from an areflexive "narcissism" to a reflected "self-discovery in the world-cosmos." In this Nobody, the last enlightenment, as critique of the illusion of privacy and egoism, comes to an end. (chapter 3)

It is in the discussion of this self-conscious nobody that both Sloterdijk's closeness to and distance from Adorno become emblematically visible. He reinterprets the famous passage in Homer's *Odyssey* where Odysseus, in a lightning flash of foresight, answers the Cyclops's request for his name by saying: "Nobody is my name." This ruse saves Odysseus's and his companions' lives because the blinded Cyclops fails to get help from his peers when he tells them: "Friends, nobody slays me with cunning," thus causing them to walk away laughing and to ignore his predicament.

For Adorno, it is all in the name. In the struggle of reason against the mythic powers of nature, the very act of physical self-preservation implies the sacrifice of the self. Identity appears as based on self-denial, an argument Adorno makes even more powerfully in his reading of the Siren episode in the *Odyssey*. For Sloterdijk, on the other hand, it is all in the conscious body. Rather than seeing Odysseus's denial of his identity as a fatal first step in the constitution of Western subjectivity, Sloterdijk emphasizes the positive aspect of physical survival, and in a Brechtian move he praises the discovery of nobodiness in the moment of danger as a welcome expansion of subjectivity: "The Utopia of conscious life was and remains a world in which we all have the right to be Odysseus and to let that Nobody live." (chapter 3) In emphasizing the importance of experiencing preindividual emptiness, the nobody, Sloterdijk moves toward a realm of non-Western mysticism that would have been quite foreign to Adorno's historically rooted reflection. At the same time it is significant that Sloterdijk does want to rescue Odysseus, that prototype of Western rationality, for the kind of alternative enlightenment that he has in mind. He advocates the expansion of the rational self into the body and through the body to a state of nondifferentiation that would, however, remain in constant tension with kynical self-assertion. Contrary to Buddhist asceticism, which aims at a transcendence of the individual body, contrary also to a Nietzschean negation of individuation, Sloterdijk maintains an affirmation of the body as "yesbody," and it is the permanent oscillation, as it were, between yesbody and nobody that undermines the pathology of identity and guarantees the expansion of the boundaries of subjectivity, Sloterdijk's central concern.

Sloterdijk's concept of a new, kynical subjectivity aims at nothing less than a new, postindustrial reality principle that contrary to the Deleuzian scheme of the schizobody would acknowledge the necessary and productive contradiction be-

tween a unified physical body and processes of psychic deterritorialization. In an age in which traditional rationality has revealed itself as the "principle of self-preservation gone wild" (chapter 9) and the political pathology of overkill presents itself as realism, Sloterdijk sees the only chance for survival in a reversal of the civilizing process itself, which has created the dominant Western mindset of "hard subjects, hard facts, hard politics, and hard business" (chapter 9). To the privileging of distance and objectification in the culture of modernity, Sloterdijk's physiognomic thought opposes a sense of warmth and intimacy, convivial knowledge, and a "libidinous closeness to the world that compensates for the objectifying drive toward the domination of things" (chapter 6). Here it becomes clear that his approach shares much common ground with critiques of Western rationality and patriarchy as they have been articulated in ecological, psychoanalytic, and feminist discourse. But this is also where a number of problems emerge. When Sloterdijk claims that *we* are the bomb, the fulfillment of the Western subject, he clearly has the reified, rational male subject in mind. The question of women's subjectivity and its relationship to the cynicism-kynicism constellation is never really explored, and the presentation of Phyllis and Xanthippe as female kynics is, to put it mildly, disappointing. What *are* women to do while Diogenes "pisses against the idealist wind," and how do they participate in or counteract the cynicism of domination? Is kynicism really the only possible way of acting and speaking in a different voice? I think Sloterdijk could have strengthened his case by focusing more thoroughly on the problem of gender and by asking himself to what extent his critique of male identity pathology might actually be indebted to feminist perspectives. A politics of a new subjectivity today makes sense only if gender difference is explored and theorized. Otherwise one runs the danger of reproducing the exclusionary strategies of the Enlightenment yet another time. Important as the argument for a new politics of subjectivity is, Sloterdijk's male kynicism remains ultimately unsatisfactory.

But then one might want to go further and ask whether the cynicism-kynicism constellation is not itself the problem. The very strength of Sloterdijk's construction—the fact that he avoids a merely binary opposition—may also imply a weakness. I am not only referring here to the fact that the kynical attack on the cynicism of domination itself has to rely inevitably on a heavy dose of cynicism. Such cynicism of the kynic is, of course, not in the service of domination. It nevertheless depends on the logic of hostility that the new reality principle of a softened, flexible subjectivity is supposed to overcome. It is difficult for me 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. The question here would be whether Sloterdijk's immanent dialectic of cynicism-kynicism does not ultimately hold him captive to what he wants to overcome.

If that were the case, the possibility emerges that the kynic may himself be sim-

ply a cynic in disguise. Throughout his book, Sloterdijk describes Diogenes as something of a loner, and when he talks about his new physiognomic thought he praises the conviviality with things rather than that with human beings. The whole spectrum of what the Germans call *Beziehungsprobleme* (the politics of the personal), which has occupied so much space in the psychopolitics of the 1970s, seems strangely blocked out. What about cynicism and ways of overcoming it in the relations between lovers and friends, husbands and wives, children and parents? What about relations at the workplace, in institutions, in leisure activities? Instead of a plausible focus on intersubjective relations, the ultimate testing ground of any new subjectivity, we get Sloterdijk's odd suggestion that we should take the bomb as the Buddha of the West, the source of negative illuminations, of enlightening *Selbsterfahrung*. What the Cyclops was for Odysseus, so it seems, the bomb is for us: the moment of danger in which we find our own nobodiness, in which we understand what it would be like "to explode into the cosmos with a complete dissolution of the self (chapter 5). Here Sloterdijk's constructive project to transform the reality principle itself by abandoning the "armed subjectivity of our callousness *ratio* (chapter 9) and by creating a new subjectivity, a new reason, veers off into a well-known male fascination with the machinery of technological destruction. Sloterdijk's meditations on the bomb, which to him are pivotal to achieving the desired breakthrough to the new horizon of another enlightenment, turn the movement of his own thought back into the cold current of cynicism he had set out to escape, and he comes dangerously close to rewriting the romantic death wish in its postmodern form. When Sloterdijk approximates Diogenes' satirical laughter to the mocking smile of the bomb and talks about the "pandemonium and laughter . . . at the core of the igniting explosive mass" (chapter 5), the cynic can no longer be distinguished from the cynic. Is Sloterdijk displaying kynical strategies or cynical attitudes? It is anybody's guess.

If indeed the cosmic laughter of the nuclear holocaust were the ultimate chance for realizing the kynical nobody, then one might want to rely after all and against better insight on the precarious rationality of overkill and madness as a strategy of survival. Perhaps there was always already too much rather than too little nobodiness in the dominant Western forms of rationality and subjectivity. Perhaps Adorno was right after all when his terrified gaze saw nothing but destructive self-denial in Odysseus's tricksterism.

III

However, the *Critique of Cynical Reason* does not simply invalidate itself here as an effective critique of contemporary culture. Its analysis of postenlightened cynicism penetrates to the core of the contemporary malaise, and the new "gay science" Sloterdijk proposes is never so gay as to make us forget the wounds and