

Disguised as a dog

Cynical Occupy?

Peter Osborne

I take my title and my philosophical cue from a passage in Marx's 1839 'Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy'. I take my artistic cue from the early work of Valie Export. The passage from Marx reads as follows:

As in the history of philosophy there are nodal points which raise philosophy in itself to concreteness, apprehend abstract principle in a totality, and thus break off the rectilinear process, so also there are moments when philosophy turns its eyes to the external world, and no longer apprehends it, but, as a practical person, weaves, as it were, intrigues with the world ... and throws itself on the breast of the worldly Siren. That is the carnival of philosophy, whether it disguises itself as a dog like the Cynic, in priestly vestments like the Alexandrian, or in fragrant spring array like the Epicurean. It is essential that philosophy should then wear character masks. ... philosophy casts its regard behind it ... when its heart is set on creating a world. But as Prometheus, having stolen fire from heaven, begins to build houses and to settle upon the earth, so philosophy, expanded to be the whole world, turns *against the world of appearance*. The same now with the philosophy of Hegel.¹

And today, we might add, in the wake of the collapse of historical communism ('1989'): 'The same now with the philosophy of Marx.'

What, you may ask, is all that about? And what does it have to do with going 'beyond cynicism' through political forms of opposition, protest and provocation in art today?*

It is about the historico-philosophical *necessity* of cynicism (in its ancient sense) – and other politically defined philosophical particularisms – at certain historical junctures, as the necessarily one-sided practical expression of the alienated universality of philosophy. Marx's doctoral research, culminating in his 1841 dissertation, *The Difference between the Democritean*

and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature, was only superficially, or academically, concerned with a comparative analysis of two Ancient Greek philosophies of nature. As the notebooks reveal, it was primarily, polemically, concerned with an allegorical reading of the condition of philosophy after Aristotle, as a model for understanding the situation of philosophy in Germany in the aftermath of the death of Hegel – and the political splits in the Hegelian school, in particular. Hence its renewed significance today.

Aristotle's and Hegel's philosophies are each presented by the young Marx as a 'total' philosophy, in the wake of which the world appears 'torn apart'. As the passage quoted above continues:

While philosophy has sealed itself off to form a consummate total world, the determination of this totality is conditioned by the general development of philosophy, just as that development is the condition of the form in which philosophy turns into a practical relationship towards reality; thus the totality of the world in general is divided within itself, and this division is carried to the extreme, for spiritual existence has been freed, has been enriched to universality, the heart-beat has become in itself the differentiation in the concrete form which is the whole.... The division of the world is total only when its aspects are totalities. The world confronting a philosophy total in itself is therefore a world torn apart and contradictory; its objective universality is turned back into the subjective forms of individual consciousness in which it has life.²

These one-sided yet nonetheless universal attempts to close the gap between subjective forms of philosophical consciousness and the world, by the becoming practical of philosophy (Marx will later call this its 'realization'), embody Marx's initial, neo-Hegelian conception of the practice of critique. At

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such moments, as ‘total’ philosophies disintegrate into one-sided fragments through their opposition to the world of appearance, the young Marx argued, subjective necessities of practice become more important than the criterion of comprehensiveness that governs the idea of theory from which they derive, and in whose name they act. Yet the necessary one-sidedness of the practices frustrates the universality they aim to realize. This analysis of the necessity of the split in the Hegelian school into a ‘Right’ and a ‘Left’ Hegelianism could be applied today to the opposition between what we might call ‘political-economic’ and ‘subjective-political’ Marxisms.

This questions current affirmative political discourses about ‘going beyond’ cynicism, because it questions the understanding of cynicism that they involve. Philosophically speaking, there are grounds for cynicism about this alleged ‘going beyond’ cynicism. However, to be cynical about the presentation of current forms of opposition, protest and provocation as going beyond cynicism is not necessarily to fail to support them, politically. Rather, it may be that such forms are best understood – and practised – cynically, as contemporary political manifestations in a long line of cynical practices of opposition, protest and provocation. The early work of Valie Export (to which Marx’s doctoral notebooks may then be taken to offer a philosophical clue) provides an initial indication of the connection.

Valie Export and Peter Weibel’s 1968 performance piece *From the Portfolio of Doggedness* – in which Export walks Weibel around Vienna on all fours on a lead – is a literal acting out of the ‘mask’ of the Cynic as a dog. The ancient Greek *kuōn*, meaning dog, is believed to be the source of the term ‘cynic’, *kūnikós*; hence Marx’s reference to the Cynic’s disguise. This attribution of dogginess was famously based on the Cynics’ polemical lack of sexual shame: masturbating in public, and copulating in the marketplace, for example, as philosophical acts refusing the Sophists’ distinction between nature and convention (*physis* and *nomos*), upon which ethics was founded. Export’s 1969 performance *Action Pants: Genital Panic* comes to mind (fig. 1). In fact, ancient cynicism is an obvious philosophical key to the interpretation of Viennese actionism as a whole (pissing and shitting (figs 2 & 3), cutting, etc.)³ in relation to which Export’s early work is both a feminist appropriation and immanent gender critique. Actionism (Viennese and otherwise; subsequently, often feminist) followed in the steps of the Marquis de Sade. As such it is the contemporary artistic version of the modern revival of the spirit of ancient Cynicism, par excellence. The ‘Occupy’ movement, I shall suggest, is an exemplary political manifestation of the same spirit.

The question of cynicism in contemporary politics – and the desire to go beyond it, at least in its everyday modern sense – is, in large part, a question of the legacy of 1968 and of a radicalism which, ‘turned against the world of appearance’, *changed* the world of appearance, in certain important respects, but not necessarily in the ways it intended, or as a result of any deeper changes in *that which appears*: the fundamental form of the social relations of capitalist societies and the dynamics of accumulation it sustains. In this regard, it is interesting to see the way in which Export’s early performances were repeated, in a collective mode, by the Valie Export Society in Estonia, in 2000, in the context of the ‘capitalist liberation’ of the ex-Soviet Baltic states (figs 4 & 5). This is one of a number of reenactments, among which Marina Abramovic’s 2005 performance of *Action Pants* should also be mentioned.

More narrowly art-institutional cynicisms, on the other hand – such as the



2&3 Günther Brus, *Clear Madness – Urination*, Excretion, 1970



self-cannibalistic institutional critique of the Institute for Human Activities' 'Gentrification Project' in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the associated seminar set up as part of the 7th Berlin Biennale⁴ – are of a different order. In historical perspective, they represent an unconscious revival of the weakened, 'polite', Enlightenment cynicism of the eighteenth-century French salon, against which first Rousseau (briefly) and then de Sade reacted.⁵ This kind of art-institutional cynicism is a 'mere' cynicism, in its modern, everyday sense of 'enlightened false consciousness', historico-philosophically diagnosed by Peter Sloterdijk in his monumental *Critique of Cynical Reason*.⁶ Georg Simmel characterized the connection of this modern cynicism to its predecessor, in *The Philosophy of Money* (1900), as follows:

Although the attitude that we today term cynicism has nothing to do with the Greek philosophy from which the term originates, there exists none the less, one might say, a perverse relationship between the two. The cynicism of antiquity had a very definite ideal in life, namely positive strength of mind and moral freedom of the individual. This was such an absolute value for cynicism that all the differences between otherwise accepted values paled into insignificance ... all



this is completely irrelevant for the wise person, not only in comparison with any absolute value, but also in that this indifference is revealed in their existence. In the attitude which we nowadays characterize as cynical, it seems to me decisive that here too no higher differences

in values exist and that, in general, the only significance of what is highly valued consists in its being degraded to the lowest level, but that the positive and ideal moral purpose of this levelling has disappeared. What was a means, or a secondary result, for those paradoxical adherents to Socratic wisdom is now central and in the process has completely altered its meaning.⁷

This is a disillusioned 'knowing better' but living no differently, which, under the conditions of intensifying art-institutional complicities, tends towards a form of barely concealed self-hatred and despair. (Its unconscious element derives from its disavowal of its own self-interest.) It is the kind of cynicism that many see both oppositional politics and its artworld mimesis as currently 'going beyond'. However, it is intricately tied up with historical conditions that make the wishfulness of this 'going beyond' a clear target for the cynical impulse itself.

In short, in historical perspective, the question is not *whether* to be cynical, or *how to avoid* cynicism, but *how best* to be cynical: *in what mode* and *in what relation* to politics?

Cynicism in and against the history of philosophy, or, the three cynicisms

It is conventional to distinguish between two cynicisms: ancient Cynicism (spelt with a 'K' in German, *Kynismus*, and an upper-case 'C' in English), on the one hand, and modern cynicism, or cynicism in its everyday derogatory usage (spelt with a 'Z' in German, *Zynismus* and a lower-case 'c' in English), on the other. However, in the light of recent, post-Sloterdijkian debates – and the somewhat tendentious, but nonetheless widespread hopes for the political potential of Foucault's final lectures at the Collège de France⁸ – it is useful to add a third: modern revivals of the spirit of ancient Cynicism, *against* its more widespread,

debased modern sense. This is the most interesting, critical, dialectical and problematic sense of cynicism, which is at stake in the political interpretation of a movement like Occupy.

Ancient cynicism – archetypically associated with Diogenes of Sinope – was a critique of philosophy in its founding Platonic form, which radicalized the Sophists’ categorical separation of convention and nature (*nomos* and *physis*) into a paradoxical naturalistic critique of convention per se. This was a performative ethical and social critique, based on an alternative mode of life (the philosophical origins of ‘counter-culture’) dedicated to asceticism and the immediate fulfilment of natural need. Hence its association with marginality and shameless indecency: in dress and sexual practice, incest even, ‘like a dog’. (The name ‘cynic’ is taken to have originated as a term of abuse, but been taken over, affirmed and given the additional connotation of a ‘watchdog’, a *moral guardian* of nature within society, by Diogenes.) Such Cynicism was a pedagogy of life, philosophy’s original vocation: to ‘know thyself’ in order to ‘live better’. Antisthenes, the first Cynic, is said to have been a pupil of Socrates. Plato is said to have referred to Diogenes as ‘Socrates gone mad’. Cynics were peripatetic philosophers, living

on the margins of the Academy and the Lyceum, ‘lone public haranguers’ who taught primarily by provocation and lived example.⁹

Until Hegel, Cynicism was generally accepted as part of the history of philosophy, even though it was handed down only second-hand and predominantly via anecdotes (no original fourth-century BCE texts survive). The main source, Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, dates from six centuries after Diogenes of Sinope. In the three things acknowledged to have dominated its transmission,¹⁰ the shape of Occupy and related movements is clearly visible: (i) asceticism, living as simply as possible, being poor (Diogenes is said to have lived in a barrel); (ii) a naturalistic shamelessness and promotion of free or plain speech, delivered with provocative humour and wit; and (iii) contempt for power. (Laertius’s archetypal anecdote has Diogenes responding to Alexander the Great’s question about what the great ruler can do for him with the request that Alexander ‘get out of his sun’.) During the Roman Empire, Cynicism was often associated with Stoicism, and was even adopted by Emperor Julian (332–362 CE) as a universal philosophy, the high point of its influence. Later, it was identified with Epicureanism, on account of its hedonistic aspect. It is said to have contributed to aspects of the asceticism of early Christianity, which the Christian supporters of Occupy have themselves revived. As a movement, it disappeared in the fifth century, living on only in theoretical and literary guises. However, after Hegel’s philosophical dismissal of Cynicism on the grounds that it lacked clearly stated ‘principles’ or systematic presentation, it fell out of academic histories of ancient philosophy, relegated to literary, dramatic and cultural histories, where it largely remains – Sloterdijk’s heroic attempt at its philosophico-political rehabilitation notwithstanding.

Modern cynicism is usually dated from its ‘polite’ revival, in the mid-eighteenth-century French Enlightenment by D’Alembert and Diderot. Hence the subtitle of Louisa Shea’s recent book on the ‘cynic enlightenment’: *Diogenes in the Salon*. This ‘cleaned up’ cynical ethic was at once a part of Enlightenment naturalism, an alternative rhetorical style, and a source for a more radical auto-critique of Enlightenment, most notably, dialectically and transitionally, in the figure of Rameau’s nephew in Diderot’s posthumously published novel of the same name. On Shea’s account, it is the character of Lui, the nephew, in dialogue with the philosopher Moi, who simultaneously



6 Ines Doujak, *Untitled, work-in-progress, studio photo, 2010*



transformed cynicism from an exceptional into a general regulative social principle and ‘perverted’ its ethical character into a self-interested and self-serving practice; thereby inaugurating its derogatory modern sense of disillusioned self-interest, which remains its usual connotation.¹¹ Henceforth cynicism would always exist in a relation of some sort to this eighteenth-century, political-economic conception of self-interest, familiar today in the ideological rhetoric of neoliberalism (albeit of little actual relevance to that ideology’s corporate-transnational economic rationale: the legal persons freed by its deregulation of markets being, primarily, large businesses). Attempts to revive the spirit and practice of ancient Cynicism, and to radicalize it further, can never wholly escape this historically imposed context; not least, as we shall see, in so far as it is a result of the reduction of social relations to the mediations of the money form.

Modern revivals of the spirit of ancient cynicism include, most notably, de Sade’s radical sexual cynicism, Nietzsche’s metaphysical project to ‘transvalue all values’ (a debasement of all currencies), and Sloterdijk’s reading of modern cynicism as the product of the *defeat* of Enlightenment, and his call to revive, once again, the performative radicalism of the ancient model. Sloterdijk’s book is especially insightful at the level of cultural history and the comprehension of the rhythm of defeats motivating successive cynical revivals: defeat/dialectic of Enlightenment – Sade and Nietzsche; aftermath of World War I in Germany – Weimar cynicism; trauma of World War II – Viennese Actionism. And we might add: the consolidation of the defeat of the hopes of 1968 by the crisis of the international Left, after 1989 – current cynicisms, all

of which can be read as *withdrawals from political space*, as previously conceived, into cynical social criticism. However, there is perhaps a deeper and more important dynamic at issue in the relationship between cynicism and politics, as such, which is connected to current forms of political protest and provocation – and especially the problematic claim that these protests are in some sense ‘beyond cynicism’. It derives from the intimate historical relationship between cynicism and money.

Cynicism, power and money

The idea of money as a metonym for the social is to be found at the source of Cynicism as a philosophical position. It explains the Cynical rejection of politics as a means

for the pursuit of its radically naturalistic ethical goals. It derives from the famous injunction to the young Diogenes offered by the Delphic Oracle: *parakharattein to nomisma*, usually translated as ‘adulterate the coinage’ or ‘deface the currency’. Different versions of the story all tell of Diogenes (sometimes helping his father) counterfeiting money, and so being expelled from his native city of Sinope, before finding his way to Athens. His philosophical career is then taken to have begun when he realizes that he has misunderstood the oracle, in a literal manner. He finally solves its riddle by reading *nomisma* (currency) as a metaphor for *nomos* (convention). He thereby interprets the injunction henceforth to allow no authority to convention, but only to nature. This radical opposition of nature to any conception of convention involves the rejection of the definition of the human as a social or political animal. As a life practice, ancient Cynicism is thus opposed to the *polis*, and hence to politics as such, in the classical sense. However, in its social critique and ascetic search for human perfection (another well-known anecdote has Diogenes roaming Athens with a lamp, in broad daylight, searching for a human) Cynicism cannot help but enter into a critical relationship with politics, which is itself, thus, ‘political’ in a paradoxical sense. This is the theatrical–political aspect of protest and provocation.

We can see this in a recent artwork (figs 6 & 7) that is classically Cynical in the form of its contempt for power: a sculpture by Ines Doujak, in which King Juan Carlos of Spain, vomiting cornflowers (symbol of Nazism), is being buggered by Domitila Chungara, a Bolivian activist from the mining town of Potosí, who is herself being fucked by a wolf. (Werewolves were said to have

been in the service of the Wehrmacht.) This is clearly a directly political work. It was never exhibited in the show for which it was commissioned, at Reina Sophia in Madrid; it was withdrawn by the museum on account of a law deeming it treasonous to insult the King of Spain. We can see the wolf is smiling triumphantly.

Both the mode and the limits of cynicism in relation to politics are closely related to the mode of practice and the limits of what nowadays we call 'art'. In fact, one might push the analogy a little further and propose that just as (for a hundred years) art has constituted its autonomy by its incorporation of anti-art elements (of which 'politics' is one), and (for 165 years now) philosophy has remained a critical discursive mode only by its incorporation of anti-philosophical elements, so (since the 1960s, at least) the Left has depended for the effectivity of its politics on the *incorporation of anti-political aspects into political practice* – anti-political, that is, in the conventional or classical sense of a practice that is directed towards a decisive transformation of social relations via the medium of the state. Cynics do not 'believe' in 'politics'; but those who *do* believe in politics nonetheless need a cynical element to their politics if they are to register, within them, the currently problematic status of 'politics', relative to both social interests and the world-historical processes of capitalist accumulation.

It is the *powerlessness* and refusal of a political programme characteristic of the Occupy movement that places it in a social space related to, yet institutionally distinct from, art. For it is an ironic condition of the mass, long-term occupations of public space with tents, which the *indignados* started in Spain a little over a year ago now, that those public spaces are no longer sites for the articulation of power. Their occupation is thus necessarily symbolic. (The situation in North Africa and the Middle East is completely different from this, and has wholly other political dynamics and meaning.) Indeed, Occupy Wall Street, in Zucotti Park, was an explicit acknowledgement of that fact, in so far as 'Wall Street' is not a formally public space (hence eviction could take place on the basis of private ownership), and, on the other hand, as a metonym of finance capital, it is effectively everywhere. Hence, the slogans: 'Net, Square, Everywhere' and 'Occupy Everywhere!'¹² But this formal logic of universalization carries the danger of rapid auto-destruction, or at least extreme dilution, and mediatic culturalization. These issues are symptomatic of the currently problematic status of 'politics', as such, relative to the world-historical development of capitalism. This problematic status is the result of three growing historical disjunctions:

first, between individuals and effective collectives; second, between collectivities and social form; and third, between social collectivities and the historical process – we might call this the shedding of the illusion of 'world-historical' action, upon which the Enlightenment concept of politics depends, since its national–historical mediations are being destroyed by changes in the relationships of states to transnational forms of capital.

With respect to the cultural dimension of this situation, in European societies, it is the culture of punk – rather than the politicized social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s – that forms the background to Occupy and related movements (especially in the UK). Punk was the counter-cultural expression of the fiscal crisis of the capitalist state of the 1970s and early 1980s. Not for nothing did punks wear dog collars. This staged animalistic reduction is classically Cynical. In their rhetorical naturalistic levelling – think also of the role of the homeless, and the debates that their presence occasioned within the Occupy camp at St Paul's, for example – such performances of life reappropriate the indifference to all 'higher' values that is inherent in the commodity structure of the money form.



Money is both the social source of the nihilistic modern form of cynicism and the reason for its inescapability. It carries with it the constant danger of the recoding of cynical critique of the social back into the nihilistic cynicism of self-interest – staged in the inevitable commodification of the cultural aspects of protest and provocation, familiar since the 1960s. Once again, the 7th Berlin Biennale marks a low point here, with its institutional incorporation of a so-called 'autonomous section' including Occupy Museums within its programme. This effectively projects the international Occupy movement as an offshoot of the Berlin Biennale. Visitors, encouraged to start their visit to the Biennale in the Global Square in order 'to turn



spectatorship into citizenship', could experience for themselves the formal subsumption of politics to the art institution. The Gentrification Project represents a transition to its real subsumption.

Simmel saw modern cynicism as

most effectively supported by money's capacity to reduce the highest as well as the lowest values equally to one value form and thereby to place them on the same level, regardless of their diverse kinds and amounts. Nowhere else does the cynic find so triumphant a justification as here ... where the movements of money bring about the most absurd combinations of personal and objective values. The nurseries of cynicism are therefore those places with huge turnovers, exemplified in stock exchange dealings, where money is available in huge quantities and changes owners easily. ... The concept of a market price for values which, according to their nature, reject any evaluation except in terms of their own categories and ideals is the perfect objectification of what cynicism presents in the form of a subjective reflex.¹³

We do not need to accept Simmel's own neo-Nietzschean 'philosophy of values' to recognize our situation here, in this description of 112 years ago. His account of the corresponding 'blasé attitude', for which the indifference of things 'destroys all possibilities of being attractive', leading to a 'search for mere stimuli in themselves', is equally recognizable.

We have here one of those interesting cases in which the disease determines its own form of the cure. A money culture signifies such an enslavement of life in its means, that release from its weariness is also evidently sought in a mere means which conceals its final significance – in the fact of 'stimulation' as such.¹⁴

It is the social occupation of the place of the universal by money that makes the abolition of money central to the concept of communism, but that also, today, relegates communism to the status of an idea, thereby putting into place an inevitable cynical supplement to Left politics.¹⁵ It is thus, as Marx argued in 1839, in the idealist terminology of the self-criticism of Hegelianism, that 'when philosophy ... as a practical person, weaves intrigues with the world ... [i]t is essential that [it] should ... wear character masks': be it the mask of the dog or of Guy Fawkes – the *V for*

Vendetta that is the V for Vengeance, the new mask of anonymity that oppositionally mimics the indifference of exchange-value to the use-values that support it. Under the conditions of a necessarily speculative collectivity, anti-capitalist politics is necessarily a politics of the mask.¹⁶

All of which should give us pause for thought about precisely what 'cynicism' is, and the different ways in which it manifests itself in the current conjuncture, before we rush to try going beyond it.

Notes

1. Karl Marx, 'Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy', in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Volume 1: *Marx: 1835–1843*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1975, pp. 403–514; p. 491, emphasis added.
2. Ibid.
3. See Peter Weibel, 'Re-presentation of the Repressed: The Political Revolution of the Neo-Avant-Garde', *Radical Philosophy* 137, May/June 2006, pp. 20–28.
4. <http://humanactivities.org/program.html>; accessed 16 June 2012.
5. See Louisa Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore MD, 2010, Part I. I rely on the framework of this excellent account below.
6. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), trans. Michael Eldred, Verso, London and New York, 1987. I reviewed the book in *Radical Philosophy* 55, Summer 1990, pp. 58–60.
7. Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money* (1900), trans. Tom Bottomore and David Frisby, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, p. 255 (correcting the typo of 'not' for 'now' in the published version).
8. Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983*, trans. Graham Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2011; *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983–1984*, trans. Graham Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2012.
9. Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment*, pp. 1–20.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid. p. 58.
12. See Nick Dyer-Witherford, 'Net, Square, Everywhere', *Radical Philosophy* 171, January/February 2012, pp. 2–7.
13. Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, pp. 255–6.
14. Ibid., p. 257.
15. It also gives rise to the money-work as a staple genre of conceptual art: in relation both to forgery (Genpei Akasegawa's *Model 1000 Yen Note Incident*, 1963–73, for example) and to its destruction as an artistic act, from KLF's burning of £1 million to Karmelo Bermejo's 2012 'Solid banknote or $-x$ (minus x)'.
16. See Peter Osborne, 'The Fiction of the Contemporary: Speculative Collectivity and Transnationality in The Atlas Group', in Armen Avanessian and Luke Skrebowski, eds, *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*, Sternberg, Berlin and New York, 2011, pp. 101–23 – an early version of an argument that is set out at greater length in chapter 1 of Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, Verso, forthcoming 2013.