

Thirty years later

Peter Sloterdijk

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On the occasion of a planned new edition of the Dutch translation of this book a few years ago, friends in Amsterdam invited me to put together a short introduction—to take the occasion to look back upon the time it was written from the standpoint of the present, and perhaps to say a few words as well about my intellectual development through those decades. Just a few words, by-the by, you understand—like when in the train station, just before getting on the train, you encounter on the platform an old friend you haven't seen for decades, and as the conductor prepares to blow his whistle, you try to convey what has been going on since last you met.

Carelessly I agreed, though I even then well knew that from such casual commitments the greatest difficulties arise. At such moments one asks oneself why it is so often ones' friends that put one in the most difficult positions. On the basis of such evidence one might well conclude that there's nothing worse than to have friends. But anyone who would try to survive without them endangers something about the nature of friendship. Friends are a gadfly, without whose effects its victims would not want to live.

Thirty years later. Looking back on such an extravagant book, the first question, naturally, is whether one would do it again—something which, fortunately, is impossible. And the answer, equally naturally, is no. It would be [all too simple] to claim that this was only because the author, because of the passage of many years of additional thought and experience, necessarily could not repeat a work from an earlier time. It isn't just personal growth that looking back on a beginning-point calls into question. The impossibility of writing such a book a second time shows not only the difference between the younger and the riper writer, if one dare invoke "ripeness" in this connection. It is more a question of the alteration in the condition of the world to which the intellectual temperament, then as now, is reacting.

Philosophy has always been some sort of spiritual emergency service, an intellectual first-responder. It undertakes to examine the rationality of the everyday world. Since Plato's day it has represented nothing less than a spiritual defense force against the craziness of the world; it flourishes as society collapses. Wisdom is the daughter of defeat, the beautiful daughter of an ugly mother. If philosophy reacts to the loss of the polis by inventing the cosmopolis, it only shows how necessity and denial lead to the same result. With evasion comes the recourse to abstraction, with which the Thinker voluntarily estranges himself from his surroundings. Plato in various dialogues introduces the figure of the Stranger, when it is a question of examining particularly thorny issues. Aristotle later went even further, more or less proclaiming that the philosopher lives as a stranger, an outsider, in every society. Ever since the tenuous connection between philosophy and society has been broken. The attempts of contemporaries to reunite them—as, for instance, in the problematic enterprise of "political philosophy"—have only multiplied the complications, rather than producing generally convincing solutions.

Between 1983 and 2013 global relations have turned upside down—something that, as we saw, could happen even without beginning a world war. And philosophical interventions must necessarily accommodate to the confusing impression of the whole, at least insofar as it is not insulated from external developments by the high-security apparatus of academia. It should be remembered that *The Critique of Cynical Reason* appeared seven years before the implosion of the Soviet Union. That event softened some of the impact of the book, since what was there described by the enigmatic term “cynicism” was not least the disastrous metamorphosis of enlightenment idealism into the treacherously deceptive realism of soviet power politics, and its multiple copies in the western hemisphere.

Other transformations have also significantly altered the map of reality in the intervening decades. After the fairly uniform post-modern era of the 90s, a new bifurcated world situation had developed by the year 2000 from the confrontation of the Americans and the Chinese. The style of the exercise of power in China, as in America, was such that the analysis of cynicism remained relevant. What went on in Abu Graib vividly confirmed the existence of what I called “herrezynismus”, as does the erection of prison camps on the model of Guantanamo. These are the most obvious monuments in the Archipelago of global injustice, unmistakable evidence of the perpetuation of the mental complex that I called cynicism. The Chinese route into cynicism was less spectacular, but obvious enough. As more and more workers living in one of the new industrial complexes, depressed about their living conditions and future prospects, threw themselves out of the windows of their sterile high rises, the managers, instead of improving their working conditions, strung nets between the towers. In Germany in the 20s that would have been called the new reality.

The definition of cynicism as “enlightened false consciousness” seems to me to have withstood the test of time extremely well, still remaining apposite as time passes. Its expression, “They know what they do, and do it nonetheless,” is as universally and daily applicable as ever.

On the other hand there are many indices in the progress of the world which point to a number of important differences of the present from the past. Just as the Tschernobyl disaster of 1986 precipitated a turn toward greater ecological consciousness, the introduction of computers into everyday life initiated a “digital” awareness, the influence of which we have not yet properly comprehended. When one considers that the invention of the printing press led to such historical movements as the Reformation and the rise of the Nation-state—for the nation-state represents the culmination of the power of print—one gets a hint of the magnitude of the changes the globalization of digital culture might bring about. One might suggest without exaggerating that the appearance of the synchronized world is the ontological adventure of our times. Something as at home in the Gutenberg era as this book cannot be comparable, even though through the interspersion of illustrations throughout the prose it anticipates a transition to an intermediate stage of expression, something like a hypertext.

One might well be justified in claiming that thirty years in our day represents the equivalent of three hundred years in earlier times. The author of a book in 1983 lives in 2013 in what is really another epoch of time, if not in another period of the world. He can testify that a biography progresses more slowly than the world does, and that the pace of an individual life no longer keeps step with the speed of innovation of technological complexity. The question of whether the person who wrote the *Critique of Cynical Reason* would write the same book again is like asking whether Nietzsche could have written

his *Unmodern Observations* in the same form, or Hegel could redo the *Phenomenology* with the same tone, or Leibniz repeat the *Monadology* in the same words. And since the explosive transformation of the medium of communication is central to the contemporary mindset, one even has to ask if Luther would have translated the Bible as he did if he could have posted it on the internet. I pose these shocking questions not in order to compare myself with the authors of the works in question or to claim comparable influence, but to suggest that 1983 is as far away from us today as any more distant historical epoch; I invoke the mighty dead only as an easily identifiable measure of distance. In any case it is obvious today that there are survivors of earlier eras who remain in decent physical and mental condition, even if they are no longer young; and these survivors are ourselves, the generation of those who were born in the latter 40 years of the 20th century. And that raises a question of the quality of the survival, a question that was not necessary to raise earlier. One can of course become senile without thereby contravening nature. But fossilization while still alive is a fate that now threatens authors who flourished in the '60s and '70s of the twentieth century. Only those escape who successfully manage to keep engaged in the intervening decades. For my part, I have done my best not to prematurely mineralize; since 1983 I have written about a dozen books, in which can be seen how I tried to make sense of the transition from the antiquity of the late 20th century into the modernity of the early 21st century. They document my personal efforts to forestall fossilization by the passage of time. They trace a theoretical transition: a course from the logical bureau of Freudo-marxism and critical theory to the eerie, mostly-inhuman world of systems theory, chaos theory, game theory, symbolic Darwinism, and, worst and most contemporary, neurology.

In the many years since the appearance of *Critique* there have often been requests to explain how it was to have written this book, whose success has seemed mysterious even to me. It was clear to me early on that to answer a question of this sort is not within my competence. No sooner was it published than I began to feel that I was not the real author of the book. After all, who could write such a monstrosity of philosophical prose and still show ones' face in the world? Rather, I saw myself as having functioned as a sort of secretary. I was the transcriber of a spiritual situation that needed to be set down in a theoretical memoire. Further, I was always convinced that contemporary philosophy only made sense as thought experiments. Thus an individual is only an echo-chamber for the expression of the relation of the world to its meaning. To that end I have always (and only partially satirically) drawn a distinction between myself, the empirical individual with my name, and the 'author', the writer of my books; and I leave it to the popular press to identify the two.

I will not attempt any 'self-critique' here. I choose not to follow Nietzsche's example. When a new edition of *Birth of Tragedy*, which he considered a youthful folly, was issued sixteen years later, he leapt to judgment:

Let me say again: today for me it is an impossible book. I call it something poorly written , ponderous, painful, with fantastic and confused imagery, here and there so saccharine it is effeminate...

He did however admit that in the work a question was raised that was well worth asking, even if it had been camouflaged in the language of Kant and Schopenhauer's formulations—the question “what is the dionysian?” Indeed, my own work was proposed to some extent as an answer to that same question. But for quite a while I have understood it very differently than Nietzsche understood it: Not as a retreat into the wellsprings of intoxication that compensate for the hardships of existence, but as a search for

the underlying source of the feeling of giddy disorientation that has characterized the life of modern man since the days of the Napoleonic wars. Today the Dionysian itself is to be understood as merely a symptom: as an expression of the inescapable sense of an unstoppable lurch forward that has permeated the experience of moderns for at least two hundred years. It is the theological ensign of a civilization thoroughly committed to mobility. I see the most telling symptom of this in the speed with which since the tidal wave catastrophe of 2004 the Japanese word *tsunami* has become a commonplace of ordinary language. People today obviously relish a talent for global self-reference. In the phenomenon of the tsunami they recognize in nature the twin of their own self perception. In this expression the inner and the outer flood meet.

I cannot deny that I could incorporate some of Nietzsche's self-criticism into my present judgment of *Critique of Cynical Reason*, especially those about the passages in the book which take too high, too jubilatory, too hysterical a tone, thereby contrasting too sharply with a subject which demands a cold presentation. Other than that, it seems to me even today that in the book not one question is raised which even a more mature respondent would have been able to answer. From the beginning the *Critique*, a multi-dimensional essay in moral philosophy, was designed to plumb a specific topic: it presents cynicism as it is, a never-before adequately described figure in the phenomenology of the manifest spirit— the fourth form of manifest untruth, following in the series with the simple lie, the psychic form of lie that takes the form of neurosis, and the systematic deception that we call ideology.

To describe cynicism in this way, and to demonstrate that it is the dominant light-motif of the zeitgeist in the twentieth century—that means to show how this novel contemporary hybrid gained the upper hand by conjoining the contraries of truth and lie in a bizarre double-faced construct. That is why metaphors of doubling play such a great role in the book. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre made similar observations when he depicted bad faith as the spiritual sickness of normality; and Heidegger in passages in *Being and Time* describes everyday life itself as a sort of primal deception, present in all ordinary lives. I was not willing to rest content with this grandiose generalization; I followed the intuition that the moment had come to develop philosophy into a critical history of half-truths. Perhaps I had glimpsed how half-truths and aggression combine in a commitment to permanent movement, ever driving forward and always considering itself progressive. The confirmation I drew from examples in the extensive literature of the Weimar Republic. So far as I can tell, this book has been more attentively read by literature professors than by philosophers.

I must admit that the question of whether after thirty years one would write the same book again does implicate one problem that is worth raising again, even though we don't deny the absurdity of the question. It is fair to want to know whether in the course of the intervening time aspects of the thematic have proliferated in such a way as to justify a new treatment. The answer to that question is unmistakably affirmative. The critique of cynical reason was read (as the doctrines of the Frankfurt School foretold) as a critique of strategic reason. It could quite legitimately be read as a continuation translated into literary language of Horkheimer's essays on the overcoming of instrumental or utilitarian thinking. In the meantime, however, I have not concerned myself with a critique of strategic thinking. If I were still that young man who wished to rescue the world with philosophical interventions, I would be torn between two projects that currently need to be addressed through cynical analysis. On one hand, we need to address the problem of simulation, since our grasp of reality has in the last thirty years reached the point that the old ontologically based distinction between things and images has effectively

collapsed. Thankfully there is less work that needs to be done in this area than there would have been in 1983, thanks to significant work already done by Jean Baudrillard.

Or alternatively, the critic of cynical reason could well find his contemporary task in a critique of universal corruption and universal self-deception. With respect to the latter, one might well think that that has already made significant advances through the work of Jacques Derrida. And as for corruption, there are many publications from young moral and legal philosophers that can count as first steps.

The author of *The Critique of Cynical Reason* observes both of these tendencies, deconstruction and the return to moral philosophy, with an attitude that one could best describe as friendly skepticism. From what I know of him, he will eventually respond to the contributions of his colleagues with a counter example. I know him well enough to suspect which direction his response will take. He'll probably say that the situation is too serious for deconstruction, and too complicated for the directness of moral philosophy. What is certain is that he will once again pick up a thread from that book, entombed 30 years ago, from which we will realize, without really able to believe it, that he actually crosses the epochs. The attentive reader will certainly notice that this is the same author who 25 years after the *Critique of Cynical Reason* wrote *You Must Change Your Life*. Both are uneasy books, books that sympathize with the staggers of civilization on the slippery slope of the times. It would not surprise me if the author, as incorrigible indirect moralist, might not again rise to the occasion and take to print to explain why it is high time that the spoiled children of modernity learn the difference between progress and tidal waves. That might well be the only difference that will finally make a difference.