

Sloterdijk's Critique of Cynical Reason. The title echoes Kant's *Critique* but Sloterdijk is far from Kant's concern with the philosophical basis of scientific procedure. Sloterdijk rejects Kant's cognitively-biased universalisms associated with the Enlightenment, such as impartiality in scientific practice, materiality-based empiricism. Instead, he argues from what he calls a 'pre-Enlightenment' tradition that posits the body, critical (i.e., not Heideggerian) 'existential ontology'. He sets the body against intellect, desire against abstraction, a sexual exhibitionist impulse versus the bourgeois boudoir and privatization of sexual desire. In essence, he calls for the instantiation of desire into Soviet-era as much as western European forms of the public sphere.

Sloterdijk's key philosophical sources are the pre-Enlightenment 'low thinkers' like the 'cheeky' (surely the translator could have come up with a better translation of the German than this?) Kynic (the K to distinguish them from later cynical reasoners) Diogenes and Heraclitus and their modern age heirs in artistic developments like Dadaism, and literary figures like Goethe's Mephistopheles.

Low theory is a philosophy of ends, of desire, embodied reason rather than the perverted thinking of means, procedure, subject-object division. Sloterdijk's low theory is one that is constantly historicizing thought and theories that obscure their functionalism and involvement in political subjectification. Low theory counters on the basis of an epistemology pinioned on the subject and physicality the 'physiognomist as philosopher'. This is pitted against, for example, forms of 'schizoid' reasoning found in Freudian analysis which must always sublimate the 'id to the superego'. Sloterdijk wants to counter 'Nobodyness' because Kynicism and embodied identity have no place, at least in pure form, in bourgeois disembodied publicness or its constant attendant dangers of nationalistic war and state's suspicion of their own and foreign populations. For Sloterdijk we need to start thinking substantively of ends because this will save us, politically, from the cynical and manipulative sciences and technologies based on procedure and other forms of means-directed thought.

A long chapter engages with Heidegger because this cynical uptake of ontology (in its conceptualization of the idea of 'homeliness', death-consciousness, in particular) typifies the corruption of ontological thought – as seen in its involvement in Nazism. Instead Sloterdijk wants to kynicise ontology and combat its political misappropriation of the human desire for belonging and community:

Inspired by the kynicism of ends, life that has learned the coldness of producing, ruling and destroying through the cynicism of means could become warm again for us. The critique of instrumental reason presses for its completion as a critique of cynical reason. Its chief task is to loosen Heidegger's pathos and break its tight hold on the mere consciousness of death. 207

Sloterdijk counters embodied cynical reason to unearth the failings of the degenerative 'master cynicisms' that dominant modern societies such as the state and military power, Christianity, sexual cynicism. His writing style is often marked by diffuseness, allusion and, particularly because he comes from a position outside the cynical traditions he analyses, somewhat dualistic. Sloterdijk also tends to a highly functionalist form of argumentation as seen in statements like, 'Imperialist power submitted to Christian Kynicism in order to tame it' (235). The master cynicisms act always thus to sublimate Kynical impulses into serving the means of power and instrumental reason rather than the ends of the good, the unstoppable complex desires and rhythms of the body.

Despite these drawbacks this book is compulsive, critical, creative in its analysis, and the examples he gives from 17th century western culture onwards are always intriguing – some of the illustrations alone are probably worth half the book's cover price. But the theoretical (rather than the stronger *historical*) bases of his critique are somewhat weaker. Sloterdijk's key thinkers, Heraclitus and Diogenes are not really strong enough to build such a wide-ranging critique of western culture and science. And a concept like embodiment could have been deepened and made more analytically useful by linguistic theorists like Merleau-Ponty, for example. Similarly, more from Foucault could have deepened Sloterdijk's analyses of the master cynicisms from a bio-power perspective.

One must, also, turn the book's historicism back upon itself. This is a height of the Cold War-era study circ. 1983 and the threat of nuclear Armageddon, its consequent features of spying and surveillance, inform its analysis of cynical reason. But cynical reasoning has moved on – the commoditization of desire, for example, it could be argued has made the 'gay sciences' themselves more corrupted as they become pervasive. And one will find nothing of the key political Other of our era - Islamophobia. Sloterdijk cannot be guilty of missing such contemporary issues, but the Euro-centric nature of his examples means it is hard to relate to his work now. And Sloterdijk *is* responsible for his glaring oversight of racial ideologies in the traditions of cynical reasoning, and the impact of colonialism.

However, how on earth this (great) book passed under my radar when I was employed in research and teaching about Habermas and public sphere theory in the Noughties is beyond me. This book was referred to in a recent TLS review of Sloterdijk's latest book and its suggestive title, like Bourdieu's *Logic of a Theory of Practice*, shouts out at one, it demands to be read. Sloterdijk is, essentially, a theorist who prefers to allude indirectly to the contemporary thinkers he has in mind. Thus, Habermas's early idea of Universal Pragmatics isn't mentioned directly but adapted in Sloterdijk's idea of Universal Polemics, or Ricoeur's ideas on rhythm analysis go unreferenced (there is one cryptic reference to Ricoeur early on in the book.) Habermas and the bourgeois concept of the public sphere, dialogic reason is more directly discussed, the diogenetic questioning of the classical Greek foundations of the public and private divide being a key feature of the book:

Where dogmatics postulates an unconditional duty toward truth, the Gay Science assumes from the start the right to lie. And where theory demands that the truth be presented in discursive forms (argumentatively self-contained texts, chains of sentences), the original critique knows of the possibilities of expressing the truth pantomimically and spontaneously.
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In this way Sloterdijk dismisses the Habermasian argument that dialogical agreement, disembodied reasoning are the bases for unbiased political argument or reasoning. So, the Habermasian idea that 'agreement' is good in itself – is a false 'Third Party' that erases the specific quality of experiential forms of knowledge and argumentation.

But Sloterdijk never really puts forward a viable utopian moment – his is a Kynicism of negation, a negative dialectic. Sloterdijk, in the end, remains a much better critic than theorist. His Gay Science, the concern with the body, of pre-Enlightenment ideas, is thin on any prescription other than that of radical dissent, of revealing 'bluff' and 'disingenuous opinion' (402) If there is anything to cling to, to hope with, it is an erotics, not just a sexual erotics, but of non-objectifying love:

[T]here is another kind of precedence that is not based on subjugation: The precedence the object enjoys in sympathetic understanding does not demand that we reconcile ourselves to an inferiority and an alienated position. Its prototype is love. The ability to concede the object a precedence would be tantamount to the ability to live and let live (instead of following the impulse to pull everything down into death with us). 360

But that, I'm afraid is just very noble guff.