NOTES ON THE AESTHETIC ROOTS OF FASCISM

ANOTAÇÕES SOBRE AS RAÍZES ESTÉTICAS DO FASCISMO

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Abstract: This article aims to unfold Peter Sloterdijk's hypothesis, in "Critique of Cynical Reason," according to which the emergence of fascism is due to the establishment of a cynical ethic in culture – a modern cynicism, a bastard offspring of the combative Greek cynicism. To this end, it will be necessary to rescue the figure of Diogenes, the ancient philosopher, his relationship with the social body and his ethic of "truth-telling." Next, we intend to outline what would be an aesthetic of fascism from its cynical bases, adapted to social logic – such as the character Peachum, by Bertolt Brecht, and the Nephew, by Denis Diderot – to finally bring such an aesthetic closer to the mode of government of fascism.
Keywords: cynicism; tragic; parody; fascism.

Anotações sobre as raízes estéticas do fascismo

Resumo: O artigo pretende desdobrar a hipótese de Peter Sloterdijk, em "Crítica da Razão Cínica", segundo a qual a emergência do fascismo se deve ao estabelecimento de uma ética cínica na cultura – um cinismo moderno, filho bastardo do combativo cinismo grego. Para tanto, será necessário resgatar a figura de Diógenes, o filósofo antigo, sua relação com o corpo social e sua ética da "fala franca". Em seguida, pretendemos delinear o que seria uma estética do fascismo a partir de suas bases cínicas, adaptadas à lógica social – a exemplo do personagem Peachum, de Bertolt Brecht, e do Sobrinho, de Denis Diderot – para, enfim, aproximarmos tal estética ao modo de governar do fascismo.
Palavras-chave: cinismo; trágico; paródia; fascismo.

"Life," Anson sometimes explained, "has made me a cynic."
(F. Scott Fitzgerald)

I don't like the party atmosphere. What kills us is blindness.
(Mano Brown, 23 out. 2018).

In 1982 Peter Sloterdijk published "Critique of Cynical Reason," a historical-philosophical interpretation of the Weimar Republic and the cultural conditions that enabled the effervescence of nazi-fascism. The unfolding of his hypothesis suggests a general theory of the emergency of fascism in modernity. Such understanding reveals a true interpretative spiral around the ethical problem of cynicism.

In this work, Sloterdijk elaborates the concept of "cynical reason" to deal with a (bad) type of cynicism that is typical of modernity: cynicism raised from a "low" social place to a "high" social place, cynicism that passes from the periphery to the core of instituted power. This cynicism, according to Sloterdijk, originates in consciousness ways of the enlightened upper classes and radiates to the rest of the social body. Sloterdijk points out that the distance between ancient and modern cynicism is so great that it is necessary to distinguish the use of the word: when writing about modern cynicism, he uses "cynicism" (*Zynismus*) and when referring to the Greek one, he employs *Kynismos* (or neo-*Kynismos*)[1].

Let us begin, therefore, with K*ynismos* – an ancestral species of modern cynicism. First of all, let us return to the famous passage between Diogenes and Plato. When Plato said that man is a featherless biped, Diogenes plucked a rooster and replied: "Behold Plato's man." This passage from contemplation to act was not without foundation. The old cynic plucked the rooster, for he depends on the act. He acts. However, the configuration of the two types of cynicism is very different if we consider the respective modalities of acting in reality. If *Kynismos* circulated peripherally in the ancient urban centers, *Zynismus* originates in the spaces of power and in the dominant institutions – in the expensive neighborhoods of the modern metropolis; if *Kynismos* lived according to the search for "true life," opposing power, cynical reason, adapted to the established order, (radically) splits consciousness and practice, slipping into the position of an enlightened false consciousness, full of lessons acquired by "rationality" and "historical experience," but devoid of any reorientation in the field of conduct.

The old cynic belonged to the "low" social strata of the community, they lived with little, begged, their audience was made up of children, sailors, and other social figures far from the established power. They wandered the streets and at the entrance of temples practicing *autarkia* (the learning of independence). Foucault described the transmission of this teaching as the creation

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1 Michel Foucault mentions, in the lecture of March 7th, 1984, the work "*Der Kynismus des Diogenes und der Begriff des Zynismus*," by Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting, published in 1979. In this book, the author already makes the same distinction between *Kynismus* and *Zynismus*, arousing Foucault's interest. Peter Sloterdjik's book was published in 1983, on the bicentenary of the publication of the "Critique of Pure Reason" and was especially grateful for the publication of Niehues-Pröbsting.

of an "armor for life" (Foucault, 2011, p. 181), preparing the learner for the events of life, instead of scrutinizing hidden knowledge. It was a moral conduct based on examples and anecdotes. It was a popular philosophy, as numerous testimonies demonstrate. The cynic was outside the institutions, the laws, and the most recognized groups: "The cynic is chased away, the cynic wanders" (Foucault, 2011, p. 178). Their task was to be ready to suffer violence: "The cynical mission is a combat mission. [...] The cynic is a philosopher at war. They are the ones who wage, for others, the philosophical war" (Foucault, 2011, p. 264). He must become accustomed to insults and humiliations. The philosophy of ancient cynicism, as Epictetus attests, sought an ethic that would not simply be a reform of individuals, but a reform of the whole world; they did not address groups – deep down the cynics addressed all people: "The cynic addresses all men" (Foucault, 2011, p. 278).

Greek cynicism was always ready to say the unpleasant things that the *polis* tried to hide from itself – in their crazy, run over speech, capable of pointing in all directions – from the mud of the houses to the sacred temples – the cynics remained committed to a "candid speech" even at the risk of death. They were committed to the *parresía*. This philosophical practice lived under the entirety of what it believed. And it disappeared as a practice, historically, throughout the Middle Ages.

Centuries later, Friedrich Nietzsche would attribute to the Greek cynics the responsibility for the ironization of tragedy – and the consequent break of the tragic genre – for having broken "all formal unity" in the literary figure of the furious Socrates (*Sokrates mainomenos*), "which they used to represent in life" (Nietzsche, 2003, p. 88); it is also worth noting that the philosophical tradition indicates that Diogenes wrote "seven parodies of tragedy" (Shea, 2010, p. 17). Greek cynicism used forces coming "from below," humor, and common reality, and this link with reality could only sabotage the tragic rigidity imprinted on the figure of the "men of action" (aristocracy). In this sense, Greek cynicism acted as a disarticulating force of "severe" forms, because reality needs to be "fought" and not crystallized into forms. Not naively, Cynic philosophy was called "canine" philosophy, because its philosophers lived like stray dogs. According to Peter Sloterdijk, Diogenes would be responsible for the creation of a low theory, inaugurating the non-Platonic dialogue (Sloterdijk, 2012, p. 154). This cynical reversal is close, for example, to the spirit of modern theater, by denaturalizing the transmitted and high forms that founded classicism. Greek cynicism, therefore, had an impetus for the disarticulation of forms.

It is important to map this element because the modern cynic does not completely renounce the disruptiveness of forms. What moves (and this appears as a determining factor) is their position in the face of power. Nowadays, instead of enmity with power, the cynic tends to conform to power. To be attracted to the force.

We can delineate an archetypal version of this cynic in Bertolt Brecht's theater, through the famous Peachum – a character from the *Threepenny opera*. Peachum is a greedy and opportunistic capitalist , who owns an organization that controls homeless people in London. The company charges a protection fee and trains homeless people to arouse pity in passersby: "To be a good

man! Yes, who wouldn't want to [...]/ But the circumstances are adverse" (Brecht, 1988, p. 51), is one of Peachum's statements. He acts like a cog in the wheel of capitalism. Peachum personally assumes the voice of justification for all social misery. It is terrible because the justifications have a double coherence: an internal one, in its primacy of submission to "circumstances," and an external coherence, because it is not a question of a well-ordered delirium of an isolated consciousness, but of the real economic functioning of the world. In Louisa Shea's interpretation, the modern cynic defends themselves from the "disappointments and instabilities of contemporary reality" by mutating subjectivity – they "transform the Kantian subject into a subject obsessed with self-preservation" (Shea, 2010, p. 152).[2]

Peachum, therefore, is not an alienated person. Conversely, Peachum is himself aware of the social mechanics and intends to achieve, in life, a maximum adaptation to the system. What distinguishes cynicism from typical ideological "alienation" is that the modern cynic achieves awareness of their alienation and shows themselves as if this "self-consciousness" would place them above the others (mere automatons of the system). The critical distancing from objects, however, is no longer fulfilled. He sees himself above and at the same time absorbed by social logic. Hence the ontological discomfort. In Sloterdijk's words: "Their falsity is already reflexively conformed" (Sloterdijk, 2012, p. 34).

For this very reason, modern cynicism is not specific, but diffuse. It hovers like a massive mist dispersed in the field of the material reproduction of life, it radiates like a conforming lethargy to create more lethargy. Not a lethargy in the sense of paralysis of bodies, but of freezing in the *praxis* structure – now endlessly reiterated and unwilling to confront the "enlightenment" of its consciousness with a new practice.

Since the modern context is not the same as the ancient Greek, the disruptive drive of cynicism tends to, slowly, become aestheticized by everyday life. And this is due to the particular status of the action. If the tragic actions of the ancient heroes (of the aristocratic classes) undid one order to establish another, in modernity every individual action seems reduced to the status of an isolated action. In Peter Bürger's words, we live in "a social organization that minimizes individual's possibilities of action as much as possible" (Bürger, 2012, p. 131). Thus, the self-reflexive consciousness does not cease to ask itself about the validity of action in the context in which one gesture contradicts another, one word cancels out the other, in which the mere fact of belonging to a social determination already implies a series of consequences in the absence of any singular (voluntary) feature of action – in Aristotle's thought "the determining principle of praxis, as well as of the practical intellect, it is [...] the will" (Agamben, 2012, p. 127); we are

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2 "Cynic (*zynische*) subjectivity likewise depends on this logic of cunning lucidity: it claims autonomy as a bulwark against the deceptions and instabilities of contemporary reality and transforms the Kantian subject into a subject obsessed with self-preservation." In the specific context of certain Central American literature of the 1990s, Beatriz Cortez goes so far as to associate cynicism with a "precariousness," in a constant tendency to submit to power: "it is a subjectivity that is only possible by slaving this individual who a priori constituted themselves as a subaltern" (Cortez, 2010, p. 25).

talking about a context in which individual action loses its former validity, but also in which the weight of the *praxis* tends to increase more and more, leading to a radical rupture between practice and will.

Therefore, this cynicism is opposed to the tragic in the sense of J. W. Goethe, for whom the tragic would be the separation from a common situation, an irreconcilable rupture, something synthesized in the definition of tragic as "act of leaving" (Szondi, 2004, p. 51), i.e., the tragic would be symbolized in the way of an effective departure ("the worst [of actions] is the one in which the character intends to act, with full knowledge, but does not act," writes Aristotle in "Poetics," "it is repugnant and not tragic, because there is no emotion" (Aristotle, 2015, p. 123) – in Aristotle's world, after all, pure courage appeared as a central virtue, which modern political reflexivity calls into question). The concept of tragic in the sense described by Soren Kierkegaard can also be introduced at this point; in a comment by Peter Szondi, the Kierkegaardian concept of the tragic shows itself in the form of a confrontation of irreconcilable divisions:

> Whereas Goethe speaks of opposition, Kierkegaard chooses, certainly following the vocabulary of Hegel's logic, the concept of contradiction (*Modsigelse*), to express with this the predetermined unity of the two colliding powers. This unity makes the struggle between such powers a tragic struggle (Szondi, 2004, p. 59).

In Kierkegaard's thought, the tragic leads to a "collision," i.e., everything that cynicism is not interested in provoking internally. Which does not mean that modern cynicism has not found a way in the face of such condition. It followed an esthetic path that allows for apparent intimate reconciliation – the path of parody. But now, unlike the hypothetical parodies of tragedies made by Diogenes, the cynic has found new material to parody. This new material to be parodied is the Self.

However, to understand the entry of this movement, we need to take a few steps back. In the dialogue "Rameau's Nephew," by Denis Diderot, we can recognize, in the speeches of the Nephew, a figure of modern cynicism – still at the dawn of modernity. In the dialogue written between 1761 and 1774, but published only in 1805, Diderot introduces us to the nephew of the renowned musician Jean-Philippe Rameau. Unlike his uncle, the Nephew has neither fame nor possessions, he is an auto-ironic, acidic bohemian, full of opinions about the social universe. In a new key, this cynic inverts the transgressive force of Diogenes. To begin with, despite declaring himself "down to earth" (p. 145), adopting a "spirit as clear as day" and a "personality as candid as wicker" (p. 90), his tone is plenty of disdain. He states that it is desirable that "man had not been born" (p. 53), for example. In fact, when narrating the story of a subject who committed a despicable act, he concludes, in a *blasé* tone, that "the atrocity of the action" places him "beyond contempt." The Nephew justifies the fact that he did not take a side against the atrocity witnessed as follows: "I didn't know whether to stay or flee, laugh, or outrage" (p. 114) – in the face of "not knowing," he chooses indifference.

Perhaps it is the case to say that the cynic's tone originates when the world, for him, becomes something beyond contempt. For this reason, perhaps, cynicism is intimately linked to the problem

of action. How to act in a world that appears to us as "beyond contempt?" What kind of ethics is developed from there?

No wonder the last speech of the Nephew is: "May I have this misfortune for another four decades: he who laughs last laughs best" (p. 152). In the context of a chronic suspicion of any effective action, triumphing – and laughing – is what remains.

By reading modern cynicism, Vladimir Safatle, in the essay "Diogenes and Diderot's Lantern," exposes (from Nephew) a suggestion for a diagnosis inspired by Hegel. Safatle performs a kind of x-ray of the cynical self. According to the Brazilian philosopher, consciousness, to become cynical, must lock up the old Self that one day exposed their "naivety" to the world. In the new situation, the empirical Self, zealous for objectivity, takes the lead and coordinates the course of life, becoming pragmatic; – we are talking about a break between consciousness and the fulfillment of practical demands, operated by the Self – which shows a rupture, at the very least, implacable. There is a split necessity. Safatle, thus, concludes: "this absolute split is only nostalgia for a blocked unity" (Safatle, 2008, p. 62); implying that nostalgia for a unity could be the most recondite and safest aspect of cynical subjectivity, something that would also imply an affective structure of melancholy – which brings us to Peter Sloterdijk's lapidary definition according to which the cynic would be a melancholic "under control" and "fit for work" (Sloterdijk, 2012, p. 33).

It would not be out of place to point out, therefore, that, unlike Diogenes – who would have written seven parodies of tragedy – the modern cynic finds another object, which is safer and more intimate, to parody. What he begins by parodying, continuously, is precisely that blocked "Self" (or that "half") that has not found a place of its own in the world. That past Self that, when presenting himself, did not find space for the dream. The Self that he experienced up close.

Cynicism, in this sense, operates violence on itself. A response that is self-flagellation. In any case, this "nostalgia," if it exists, is not apparent – the most apparent thing in the cynic is the inflation of his consciousness, overloaded with reflexivity. To the extent that the affective nucleus bars the doors, the split of the Self is established (something that psychoanalysis would call dissociation), the rational consciousness enables itself to observe, to extract reflection, and to instruct itself with everything. This reason learns to walk alone, outside the old cadence – the cadence of the heart. That is why the "tell-all" of the modern cynic is divorced from a *pathos*, because he can say anything, he can attack God, the world and himself, say atrocities, create embarrassment, distill hate speech, displease, publicly confess scandalous elements, all with the same coldness (except for anger, usually contained) of someone who speaks any pittance – because, following this line, a recondite fantasy has preserved all the cynic's saying of a real affection from themselves to themselves.

Hence the parody, in the mold of Diogenes, becomes a parody of the self – a parody of the blocked Self. The blocked self can only be accessed by parody. Therefore, if we think like Linda Hutcheon, for whom parody "disenchants" the model – "parody makes its model caricatured" (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 70) – we begin to glimpse the aesthetic strategy of cynicism: the transfiguration

of the enemy into caricature. Making a caricature is not "counter-arguing," but transporting the debate to another field of articulation. This is a formal procedure.

The game now lies between a real Self and the parody of this hidden Self – both connected by (then) transparent vessels of communication. Cynical cunning, not for nothing, depends on the *modus operandi* of irony – a way of dealing with the generalized situation of indeterminacy. If irony does not enable contagion with objects, if it continually distances itself, taking a step back every time an object takes a step forward, if it prevents the internal synchronization of one body with another, this inevitably leads to a dull view of phenomena. Therefore, to the extent that cynical discourse is clarified in the form of transparency, its affective tone becomes grayer; Irony extinguishes the colors of the object, also erases the music of the object and spiritually empties the object – everything that requires contact to be made. Cynical irony feels nervous, ashamed, and repulsed for authentic expression, for any contact with the blocked "Self" (the naivety of expression without that "self-consciousness" sounds as out of place for the cynic as a newly fashioned garment), it feels comfortable only in regions dominated by some trace of its peculiar rationality, regulating its internal complex. A condition that is not only problematic, but that continually borders on the unsustainable.

That is why in the context of general ironization, consciousness – always called into question by the reflective process itself – tends to be split, duplicated, because in its social sedimentation it loses the guarantee of being a privileged space regarding the "mechanics" of the world; That is, the cynical sense of reality tends to produce a certain leveling between consciousness and other objects – one sphere of consciousness looks at another sphere of consciousness as if it were an artificial object and vice versa. The distance of one sphere regarding the other will slip into mutual disaffections, into a mutual emptying of value, making room for corrosive, gray, afflicted (self) criticism, producing ironic applications – from oneself to oneself – with all the spiritual wastes inherent to this swimming.

In this process, cynicism finds the most appropriate aesthetic, something like its natural residence: self-irony. The moment cynicism succeeds in installing it within the consciousness – at that point, finally – the "enlightened false consciousness" finds the timbre of its voice. This self-irony would not be possible, however, without the intricacies of an unfortunate practice; If cynicism germinates from the distance between dramatization of consciousness and frivolous repetitions of everyday life, then it grows in the light of emptied material rites, with a tendency to respond to impasses via automation:

> Repetition that may well dispense with any and all subjective engagement. In fact, it is even better [for power] that the individual takes a critical distance regarding their doing, that he is not confused with his roles and social rituals. In this way, the inertia in action modification will be even greater, as the subject becomes detached from his own act, which gains the strength of automatism (Safatle, 2008, p. 106).

The self-ironic form, in the context of cynicism, incorporates in itself the old criticisms that conscience made of the world, reinforcing that indistinction between the miseries of the world and miserable nature itself. This "downgrading" demoralizes the cynic in the face of themselves and reality. He no longer feels authorized to imagine an effective critique, doing so only with lip service – criticizing the world was something always present in the intercourse of the internal process experienced by the cynic, as a desire and as a potency, but this becomes difficult to the extent that their self-irony internalizes the logic of power. A power that has seen the validity of its ideological justifications disappear begins to incorporate this invalidation into its own discourse; he does not need to hide anything (he can "say-everything"), while at the same time he does not give up a rationality capable of justifying his place above others; that is why power conducts criticism, but cynically.

Thus we return to the point according to which cynical rationality shows transparent justifications. The word transparency is important. With self-irony, the cynics subjugate themselves to transparency, which means, so to speak, such adherence to the "world." He loses the last vestiges of what would be a *autarkia* – category of Greek cynicism: its distinction from the world; that fiber capable of transforming social expulsion into haughtiness, in the strong sense of the term. Such *autarkia* weakens the firepower of cynical discourse. With the Greek Cynics, writes Frédéric Gros, "it is a matter of making the truth explode in life as a scandal" (Gros, 2004, p. 163). Even now, the scandal survives, but it is not able to explode in life, because in the contemporary situation transparency "annihilates the smell of things, the perfume of time; transparency has no perfume" (Han, 2017, p. 76). The truth ejected by cynical discourse now tends to reduce itself like a weak power, like a dry, loud, and fluttering scandal without vibration coming out of the mouth of a self-conscious automaton (which has learned to laugh at itself).

Cynical consciousness is unable to demystify its own demystification process. Thus, this reflective apparatus paralyzes, discourages, and shields the demands of the *práxis* to any movement of thought – dispersed or unfolded; for he sometimes simply twists the knot of the problem without transforming anything. Going beyond the notion of a dialectic between thought and activity, consciousness and p*ráxis*, operated by Marx and Engels (Marx, 2013, p. 255-256), cynicism results from a radical disagreement between the two categories. The cynic, a pre-defeated one, is dragged into a condition in which any real attempt at confrontation sounds naïve.

Now, instead of the savage onslaught to unmask the political lies of the *pólis*, the cynic lives a kind of petrified accumulation of unmaskings – but accommodated in capitalist daily life and in the attraction of power. The question of material "position," as we have seen, is decisive in this aspect. Because the process of conforming to the dominant *práxis* opposes the material rupture advocated by the ancient Greeks. Modern cynicism emerges as a survival lesson; it appears as a tool capable of rationally organizing the helplessness of contemporary life. Cynicism bequeaths to the conscience a cunning to endure the contradictions that reality has entangled; Cynicism organizes life and imposes normality in which the awakened sensibility had accumulated only wounds. For

this reason, it leads consciousness, as well as the body, to an affective closure – to survive, psychic life cannot be left exposed to the open air of the cities.

It is from there that we truly approach a theory about fascism. Peter Sloterdijk states that the project of a cynical critique of reason "would remain an academic bead game if it did not seek a relationship between the problem of survival and the danger of fascism" (Sloterdijk, 2012, p. 37). According to him, fascism "with its moldy confusion between capital and populist ideology, idealisms, and brutalities, deserves a unique philosophical predicate: cynicism of cynicism" (Sloterdijk, 2012, p. 329). In this sense, we can connect the debate on cynical ethics to fascism's favorite form of governing, that is, the "state of exception."

Fascism, as the master of the "state of exception," assimilates the cynical logic of a simultaneous application/suspension of the law: "To be outside and, at the same time, to belong: such is the topological structure of the state of exception" (Agamben, 2004, p. 57). Fascism does not hide this double relationship and its duplicity is transparent – "as if anomie were internal to the normal functioning of the Law itself" (Safatle, 2008, p. 88).

Agamben reminds us:

> What characterizes both the [Italian] fascist and the Nazi regimes is the fact that they enabled the current constitutions to subsist [...], accompanying – according to a paradigm that was subtly defined as a "dual state" – the legal constitution of a second structure, often not legally formalized, which could exist alongside the other thanks to the state of exception (Agamben, 2004, p. 57).

In reading this excerpt, in the book "Cynicism and Bankruptcy of Criticism," Vladimir Safatle asks if we do not have here a case of normative structure "that is always accompanied by its parodic double?" In other words, the Law and the parody of the Law. Safatle continues: "How to understand the subjective position of individuals who support a power, which follows the Law and its negation at the same time, except via cynicism?" It is for this reason that, when we transpose the aesthetic modulation of cynicism to politics, something of the contemporary world becomes understandable.

If we think about the way of governing of current figures descended from fascism (figures sometimes openly claiming historical icons of fascism, such as Hitler or Mussolini, or sometimes concealing this political link, but in general figures who cynically associate themselves with these icons – that is: at the same time they assume and do not assume depending on the context, etc.), we have discovered that the aesthetics of the interchangeable game between the Self and the parody of the Self applies at all times in this infernal machinery. It is a tactically flexible mode of government, within which one can move smoothly from coherence to incoherence – even venturing to the borders of paradox. In this way, we are faced with rulers who at the same time assume the position of power (hold and exercise power) and parody the office; they integrate the institutions and elect these same institutions as arch-enemies.

From this – from such a radius of vision – perhaps we will be able to elaborate better on fascism's ways of governing, the apparent contradictions of its political routine, the humorous performances, the unusual figures of speech, the use of a moral logic full of reversals, the problematic idea of order, the functioning, finally, of certain governments – with presidents who expose themselves as rulers to the same extent that they parody themselves and the own role assumed before the State.

This article precisely aims to trace a little the aesthetic trace that brought us here – to this new historical situation of the emergence of fascism.

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