

# Cynicism, the Heuristic *Pharmakon*

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WHEN ROB INVITED ME TO JOIN THIS PANEL, I'll admit my first thought was that since the Professional Concerns proceedings regularly turn up as readers' forums in *ESC*, accepting his invitation could mean a potential publication. How's that for cynical?

In William Chaloupka's book *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America*, the author succinctly defines cynicism as "the condition of lost belief" (xiv). Synonyms for cynicism clarify this condition: disillusionment, jadedness; canniness, as opposed to credulity; realism, as opposed to romanticism. This equation of cynicism and realism—often the rhetorical self-defence of the accused cynic—relates to another set of synonyms: cunning, disingenuousness, manipulation, ulterior motive, where "ulterior" means "material" or "selfish." Deprived of or indifferent to meaning, the cynic finds motive in the market. "Cynics understand that everything has its price," Chaloupka says (23).

The first thing everybody who actually studies cynicism learns is that this contemporary, commonsense meaning of cynicism differs greatly from that of its classical origins. But, here, I am interested in the term's contemporary meaning, the "condition of lost faith": Chaloupka's definition may be concise, but it is also capacious, accommodating different

kinds of cynicism. Cynicism means different things depending on whether it is coming from a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional position. The cynicism of rulers is different from that of the ruled, and among the rulers and the ruled are different kinds of cynicism. Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* distinguishes between cynicism and *kynicism*: cynicism is the condition of "enlightened false consciousness" for the profiteering policy-making of rulers; *kynicism* is its complement among the ruled, a carnivalesque mode of criticism and ridicule that Slavoj Žižek describes as "more pragmatic than argumentative: it subverts the official proposition by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation; it proceeds *ad hominem*" (29), that is, attacking the speaker to expose his or her personal stake in said proposition.

So cynicism can productively guide critical thinking about social relations under late neoliberal capital, in terms of power and ethics, in terms of knowledge and interpretation. A cynical perspective makes for a safe bet in speculating on or interpreting the actions and statements of neo-liberal rulers—meaning transnational corporations and the state governments that serve them—since they are so exclusively governed by the profit motive. Since the hard right turn of the late twentieth century, the cynicism of corporate capital rule has become increasingly bold, even shocking, in its nakedness and hence increasingly open to *kynical* critique. After taking office in 1995, Ontario's education minister became notorious for describing to fellow officials a decidedly cynical plan to "create a useful crisis" in education, expressly to "bankrupt the actions and activities that aren't consistent with the future we're committed to" (Snobelin quoted in Keefer 36–37). This was disillusioning stuff to hear at a time when I was an undergraduate English major.

*What's at stake?*<sup>1</sup> *Where's the money going? Who stands to gain here?* These cynical questions are useful for cultivating critical thinking in the context of late capital. But cynical thinking entails risks, too. In addition to its personal, psychological risks (like depression), cynicism risks reproducing the structures of power that precipitate it. To equate cynical thinking with critical thinking is to credit the profit motive as the only motive, to reify capital as the only game in town. If neo-liberal hegemony has perfected the modus operandi of wielding a hammer to make everything look like a nail, the cynical critique of capital must take a hand in the flattening that ensues. Cynicism is late capital's heuristic *pharmakon*:

1 This is the great question Patrick Holland (Professor Emeritus, University of Guelph) taught me to ask.

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both poison and antidote.<sup>2</sup> Take, for example, a recent *ESC* Readers' Forum article about the *ACCUTE* dance party. My delight at seeing this article soon gave way to dismay at its cynical reduction of the scene to an “ideologically problematic” performance of “cruel optimism” to “stave off pessimism and despair” over the academic job market and the “corporatization of universities” (Cowan 19–20). A cynical argument like this is understandably based in the intolerable limbo of precarious academic work (and I get that; I've been there), but this argument mistakes its target. Social dance—work against labour, desire without object—is categorically just too subversive, too *queer*<sup>3</sup> a scene to be so shortchanged, confined to the hunger games of academic labour. (And I would add that the *ACCUTE* event isn't just an example of social dance's *radicalis*. It's an *exemplar*.)

The related risk in cynical critique is the presumption to know. This risk occurred to me as I re-read Bill Readings's 1996 book *The University in Ruins*, which argues for critical pragmatism in the wake of the university's transformation from a national-cultural institution to a transnational corporation. It occurred to me that capitalist ideology has structured and naturalized not only what we understand as ideology but also what we think we understand as being outside or disabused of ideology. Readings emphasizes late capital's indifference to ideology, which has implications for “ideology critique” as the core practice of cultural studies (if not the humanities in general). “If the ideological has become visible,” he writes, “it is because the high-stakes game has moved to another table” (104). Like Readings's claims for the replacement of ideology by “the cash-nexus” of transnational capital, cynicism's claim to disillusionment itself needs to be interrogated. By purporting to dismiss or dispel ideology, cynicism represents the social relations of capital—its neoliberal hegemony—as the only reality of the social. But this too is ideology, a socially constructed reality of which we should remain critical (Žižek 30). There may be something else underlying it; there may not. Cynicism, as *pharmakon*, carries its own ideological illusions. It's not just about what everybody knows; it's about what everybody thinks anybody *can* know.

2 See Jacques Derrida's theory of the *pharmakon* in “Plato's Pharmacy.”

3 On the historical subversiveness of social dance, see Susan McClary (30–33), Paul Gilroy (210), and Gilbert and Pearson (179–84). On the related radical and anti-capitalist theorization of queerness, see Cathy J. Cohen (440) and Alan Sears (101–02). I thank my research assistant Sarah Mann for supplying these queer theory references.

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