

The Fatuousness of Cynicism / Theses Against Cynicism (Pleasure Tendency, Leeds, 1987)

Posted on [May 1, 2012](#) by [@ndy](#)



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1.

At a time when people everywhere are being taken in by the lies and distractions presented by the media, we find everyone at the same time defending their cynicism, their self-proclaimed recognition of what is “really” going on.

This cynicism reaches every corner of society. Saturating conversations at work, every discussion of politics and personal life, everyone obliged to give the impression that “we know” what games are being played, what politicians are “really” up to...

“Nobody is pulling the wool over my eyes”. Cynicism is a joke, nowhere more apparent than in the pages of *Private Eye* or in the spectacle of “Spitting Image”. Here we are all encouraged to laugh hard at how fucked up and corrupt the situation is.

Forced controversies encourage nothing but complacency. They are nothing but a silent agreement to avoid putting anything seriously into question [and] as such are a fraud.

Accepting cynicism as a necessary option, by sacrificing any control over our own destiny, we recognise ourselves only as victims. By molding a recognition of oppression into acceptance of the “facts of life”, we shed responsibility, declaring that the game is rigged as our reason for continuing to play!

Of course there are real enough social reasons for this cynical consciousness, but that doesn't make it right. Just as there are real enough reasons for the rise of neo-nazism amongst today's proletarians who snatch at the simple solutions offered. But poverty doesn't make fascism right. It never has. The causes of a belief don't justify it. It is the consequences of beliefs that ultimately matter the most.

Cynicism in everyday culture has the character of a pre-emptive counter-revolution, sapping the will to resist or even struggle.

The enemy is transformed into something universally untouchable, rather than something particular. The "know it alls" have substituted the notion of an omnipotent, ever present oppression to mask their own fear. If we really did know all we need to know, were already aware of how the world works and where to place responsibility for our unwilling obedience, then we would hardly be in the mess we are in. Revolution would have overcome its major stumbling block, but this blockage is neatly put into, and kept in place, by cynicism itself.

2.

Cynicism is a surrender, an agreement not to exercise free will. It closes all possibility of escape from that which is unbearable by sacrificing hope- "Que sera, sera".

By the postures and language of cynicism we pretend that we have sussed everything out, that we really know the score. Some of us would do pretty desperate things rather than face up to the possibility that we haven't got a clue of what is going on.

The cynic is the defeatist who has walled him or herself into a tomb of self-justifying excuses, willfully forgetting that there was ever hope and forgetting that they have chosen to forget.

A cynic is someone who does not want to be disturbed by the knowledge of reality and its possibilities, and is prepared to be buried alive for fear of being found out to be the victim of a pathetic fraud.

Cynicism is the extrovert form of suicide. It denies that the world can change. But it does.

3.

Cynicism comes in all shapes and sizes. From the arrogance of journalists to the bitterness of jaded idealists who've chucked away all their ideas, too tired to retrace their mistakes and admit they only got some things wrong.

It is the religion of everyday life- "Be realistic, demand the inevitable". Cynicism prevents people from doing things they might otherwise be able to contemplate doing, even if it doesn't actually prescribe how people should live their lives. It rules things out, declares battles to be lost before forces have been joined; it announces the decisive issues to be not worth it. In numerous ways it insidiously demoralizes us, unbending the springs of action.

The social conditions for cynicism can be found everywhere. Its foundations are in our surroundings that scream at us, “That is the way things are and this is the way you are”. Cynicism, with the nerve to define itself as wisdom, “understands” all this, yet takes the solidity of our environment as a sign of its unchangeability.

We routinely miss or evade the difference between reasons for obeying rules and the reasons why particular rules are imposed in the first place. We treat [them] as if they were laws of nature. The words of cynics sputter disempowerment as efficiently as a machine gun in the hands of a cop.

Cynicism is the opposite of vandalism. Instead of desecrating walls or smashing physical structures, it builds impenetrable walls of its own and posts warnings like, “It’s no good banging your head against a brick wall”. The damage done by cynical restraint far exceeds the more visible effects of literal vandalism.

4.

Another aspect of cynicism’s fraud is that there might be a difference between a genuine cynic (an idealist who has learnt the sobering lessons from the hard knock of experience) and a mere imposter (putting on airs to give the impression they’ve seen something of life). There is no difference. Copying cynical phrases from a book is no more superficial than the person who wrote them in the first place. Cynicism is meant to be easily imitated. What the cynic claims to “know” is only what any fool can say.

Cynicism’s prime function is to forestall knowledge, to short-circuit the process of learning (remember the cynic “knows it all” already). It is always in fashion because it is the perfect cover for every possible foolish act or retreat.

5.

Cynicism amongst revolutionaries provides for their eventual defection. They have their excuses ready made by blaming “The System” for all the unscrupulous behavior which cynicism makes inevitable.

For most people, cynicism is a failure of nerve. The cynics are faint-hearted for refusing to face up to the fact that the world is nowhere near as hopeless as they would like to think. Cynicism rationalizes cowardice as “realism”, denying the thought that there are many things that can and should be done which might put courage and integrity back on the agenda.

Cynics cringe at the need to act from moral necessities, just as they scoff at practical proposals which they say would be “futile” simply because they go against the prevailing grain. Cynicism today is generalized conformism.

Cynicism is a bank of excuses, from “You can’t change human nature”, or “People are basically selfish”, to the well-worn apologies, “I’ve got my family to think about”, and, “It’s more than my job’s worth”. Cynicism’s language is the rhetoric of scared bureaucrats who simply con themselves into believing that they have seriously weighed up [the] price of breaking the rules, when really they had no intention of considering it a practical option at all.

There is no “human nature” that one can incriminate for the banal fact of selfishness. Behind the cynical generalizations, moral cowardice and obstinate refusal to use one’s intelligence or imagination can by no stretching of words be referred back to “human” or “natural” causes.

6.

Perhaps the most grotesque aspect of cynicism is its sheer irresponsibility. Just as its exaggerated negativism is insincere, its oversimplification of every issue guarantees that nothing practical is being considered.

Belief in one’s own impotence (as if it were the world’s fault for not being ripe enough for radical change) brings the reassurance of eternal irresponsibility. While the practicalities are left in the hands of electoral careerists and other professional cynics.

Cynicism thrives at the very core of social movements that make themselves into alternative subcultures, or even special interests. It does this by selecting a defined “other” as the oppressor and the source of all problems. What the cynic will blame on the world or “human nature” the radical minority will blame on the specific object of their resentment (“All men are rapists”, “All humans are animal abusers”, etc.).

7.

Cynicism is just another off-the-peg ideology. It’s made to fit so well you won’t even know you’re wearing it. It is the consciousness of the unconscious.

The consciousness is produced and reproduced. The culture of cynicism is everyday noise, the non-stop bark of deafened dogs, complaining that it’s a dog’s life, but too well trained to bite the hand that’s feeding them their lines.

8.

What is it that gives cynicism its substance? What permits us to reduce what is going on into something omnipotent?

Cynicism thrives on “reducing” everything into ready justifications. If such “reductions” are so popular, we have to ask what it is that things are “reduced” to?

There is, in society as it stands, only one reality that everything can be reduced to, and that is because everything is reduced to it, and produced by means of it. It is something whose mundane familiarity fools not only the cynic, but all of us, into thinking we must understand it.

That “thing”, which is not a thing, that which we all imagine we know about, is money.

We treat it as the essence of the profane, and yet it is the cult for which we are ready to accept that millions of lives are routinely sacrificed. In the refusal to see anything mysterious about money, the cynic and the idealist are united.

We “know” that we work for the sake of money and we “know” that’s just about all there is to be said about it. There is, it seems, nothing peculiar about people’s relationship and behavior towards commodities and money[.] “Well, that’s hardly surprising, is it?”

The antidote to cynicism is the transcendence of the realism (“That’s the way things are”) which nourishes the cynical creature we have to tame. Our gaze is being directed away from the world as it could be and the flowering of our potentials.

The possibility of transcendence does exist in reality itself. Courage, sacrifice, trust, generosity all bear witness to the way people’s actual behavior soars high above the crippling notions that cynics pass for reality.

The world is in some respects even worse than the cynics say; in other respects it contains more possibilities for genuine happiness, as well as more actual happiness, than even optimists bother to register. These are not separate aspects. The task of distinguishing the good from the bad would be helped considerably if we stopped talking about the “world”.

What we have to deal with is this society we inhabit, not some philosophical notion of the world as a whole. This society is no more a homogeneous totality than the “world”. And if there is an order, a pattern, a “system” at work in society, then it will be a historically specific one, not a timeless, all-powerful abstraction.

Cynicism deserves to be made the object of its own ruthless scrutiny; it must be forced to disclose what it is meant to suppress.

In the light of criticism, cynicism stands revealed as the very disease of which it claims to be the diagnosis.

“It is impossible for a people to rise above their aspirations. If we think we cannot win, we most certainly cannot. Our greatest enemy is our defeatist attitude. Our oppressors’ greatest weapon of repression is their psychological apparatus by which they impregnate our people with a defeatist complex.”

~ Adapted by Rich Peyote from “Theses Against Cynicism” by The Pleasure Tendency.