

**JOHN F. KENNEDY-INSTITUT  
FÜR NORDAMERIKASTUDIEN**

**ABTEILUNG FÜR SOZIOLOGIE**

**Working Paper No. 90/1996**

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**The Cynical Malaise  
in Culture and Politics**

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**ISSN 0948-9436**

# **The Cynical Malaise in Culture and Politics**

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A number of years ago, in 1990 to be exact, I was completing a book on American political culture. In retrospect, the initial reactions I received to its title, and to its first line, reveals a lot about the political situation today, specifically about the common problems faced by both the established democracies of North America and Western Europe, and the aspiring democracies of East and Central Europe. They also suggest what we, as intellectuals, may be able to do about these common problems.

Among my European friends and colleagues, *The Cynical Society: The Culture of Politics and the Politics of Culture in American Life*, seemed to be predicated on a bazaar notion: that America is a cynical society. The opposite, in fact, has long appeared to be obvious in the cultural relations between Europe and America. Europeans are cynical, while Americans are naïve. Depending on the circumstance and the viewpoint of the observer, this proposition comes in a number of judgmental variations upon the common theme. From: Americans are hopelessly naïve, young and foolish, while the Europeans are cynical, world weary and wise, to: Europeans are jaded, without principles and cynical, while Americans are youthful, with firm beliefs and the force for democratic hope.

The positive version of these comparisons dates back to the early days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, with its leaders' vision of the American Puritan community as a "city on the hill," an example for all the world to see a truly Christian way of life.

The negative version was probably most notable here after the end of the First World War, when the political orientation of the Americans for the first time began to effect European political and economic life. The naïve Wilsonian vision of a "world made safe for democracy" provided the opening for the harshly cynical terms of the Versailles treaty, with its tragic consequences.

In more recent years, the superpower status of the United States has added serious drama to these comparisons. American true believers with an unsurpassed nuclear arsenal faced their Soviet counterparts, with true belief fading into harsh geopolitical cynicism and the machinations of the C.I.A. and the K.B.G.. At the highest level of state, there could no longer be talk about the naïveté of the Americans, but there apparently was still a huge chasm between the gentlemen of the power elite and the general public, which only slowly was narrowed. The new film about the fifties, *Quiz Show*, tells the story of the beginning of the narrowing process. The prosecution of the Vietnam War turned a large segment of the American public into cynics. Watergate and its aftermath turned cynicism into a truly mass phenomenon.

Yet, the old European/American comparison following the long established pattern still seemed to hold. From the cynical European point of view, there was general confusion about Watergate. That the head of state used the powers available to him to maintain and increase his authority seemed to be quite natural, the mark of a shrewd statesman, not an impeachable offense. It may have been the case that Americans lost their faith in their governing elites during the Vietnam War and Watergate, but that such events are a cause of this transformation may appear to the cynical European as further evidence for American naïveté. Thus, my European friends still had their doubts about the title and the substance of my study of American political culture.

Some of my compatriots also were dubious. My first line reads: "I believe that the single most pressing challenge facing American democracy today is widespread public cynicism." At the time, this line provoked numerous complaints, among my academic colleagues, on radio talk shows and by some reviewers.

Among the critically inclined, it appeared that I was not facing up to the tremendously serious problems of American society: the poverty, the racism, the sexism, the declining fortunes of the bulk

of the population during the Reagan-Bush years. I was substituting cultural criticism for political and economic analysis, cultural complaint for political action.

Among the more satisfied, there was denial - the assertion that as a cynical New Yorker and an intellectual New Leftist, I projected my own jaded view of the world on the American public. (In the American imagination New York often takes the place of Europe in the aforementioned comparisons between Europe and America). For the partisans of Reaganism, my analysis of cynicism as an odd form of legitimation, combining disbelief of leaders with acceptance of the existing relations of power, was just not acceptable.

Thus, both on the left and the right, there were doubts about the major thrust of my analysis.

Today, though, three years after the publication of my book, things are quite different. Across the political spectrum, it is impossible to avoid the complaint that ours is a cynical society. The President has given speeches on the subject. It is the theme of major articles in newspapers and magazines. On radio and television news programs, cynicism has become the term which is used to describe all that is wrong with the present state of our political affairs. As an author, I feel a sense of pride and vindication, of course, but I also feel terribly uncomfortable. For, I know that there is a great deal of imprecision and misunderstanding in the present fashion of using cynicism as a major theme in political diagnosis. There is more to cynicism than meets the eyes of our politicians and casual political commentators.

When I argued that cynicism was American democracy's major challenge, I did not intend to propose that a cultural phenomenon apart from our major social problems, or apart from the exercise of power, was more important than the social problems and the abuses and injustices of power. Rather, my thesis was that cynicism is a major instrument of power and that this instrument makes

social wrongs immune to democratic intervention. I took very seriously the implications of the common sense assertion that all politicians are corrupt. If the political elite and the citizenry truly believe this to be the case, the Marcusean nightmare of a one dimensional society will be realized; the Foucaultian identification of liberalism and totalitarianism will prove to be true. The powers that be will remain unchallenged. This has the effect of making democracy, as the rule of the people, seem to be besides the point, a mere illusion, no more than a pretty and naïve ideology. I can think of no more serious a challenge to American democracy than this appearance. Thus, my contention that cynicism is the most pressing challenge to American democracy.

There is now a more general recognition that cynicism is a pressing problem, and that the problem is not confined to any particular democratic polity. There are cynical political figures wherever one looks. We Americans have Ross Perot, the epitome of the cynical politician, while the Poles have had Tyminski, the Italians, Berlusconi, the Russians, Zhirinovsky, and the Peruvians, Fujimori. The Japanese have lost all faith in their political parties, while the British cannot find an alternative to Thatcherism. And, if I am not mistaken, here in Germany, the turn to Kohl and his allies, is more because there seems to be no alternative, and because of a politics of fear, than because of a conviction that he and they have governed well in the recent past or are likely to do so in the future. Cynicism seems to be the prevailing international political attitude.

In each country in which cynicism is on the rise, there are local explanations for its appearance. Yet, the fact that it is appearing in so many different places suggests that there may be a common cause, or set of causes, and these surely go beyond the sorts of explanations American politicians and political commentators utilize. I suggest that the relationship between cynical cultural attitudes, on the one hand, and the changes in the configurations of geopolitical conflict and

ideological contests, on the other, must be closely examined. On both sides of the old iron curtain, the relations between power and understanding, between meaning and coercion, have disrupted the previously prevailing political culture. The prevalence of cynicism as a political orientation is directly related to this.

My first investigations of cynicism as a mode of legitimation were conducted not west of here, in the United States, but east of here, in Poland and Central Europe. My years spent traveling around the old Soviet Bloc presented to me a theoretical challenge. How was it possible that the Communist systems survived despite the fact that it was difficult to meet a person truly committed to the official ideology and its practical realization?

I came up with the notion that a very unusual form of legitimation process was in place, what I called a "legitimation through disbelief." I realized that this notion seemed to be an oxymoron, but, I proposed it, nonetheless, because I could find no other way to explain the rather odd and apparently stable set of political affairs in the previously existing socialist societies. These were societies in which one set of the political authorities controlled a remarkable range of societal life, from macro and micro economic structures, to all political and cultural institutions. They accomplished this without political convictions supporting this state of affairs and despite the fact that there was little brute coercion of the Latin American sort. To be sure, in East Germany, Soviet Russia and Bulgaria, it was not as difficult to find a committed communist as in Hungary or Poland, and repression was more directly used, but even in those societies the time of genuine revolutionary élan was over. Something other than the brute force of terror and the political conviction of ideology was holding these societies together, was insuring that the political will of the authorities was realized.



After puzzling over this problem for a long time, I realized that one of the most prominent cultural characteristics of "really existing socialism," the hackneyed use of official language in all public life, the language of newspeak, played a central role in the legitimation of authority in these societies. Because people used the official language to get on with their lives, even when they did not believe it, they, in their interactions, confirmed the order structured by the disbelieved newspeak. This is why speaking the truth in public, as Vaclav Havel prescribed, was understood by the authorities as being a fundamental threat to the established order, and in fact was crucial to the effective challenging of the order, from the unionized factories of the Solidarity movement, to the streets of Leipzig and Prague during their velvet revolutions. Because a fundamental cynicism in the affairs of everyday life sustained the totalized system of communist control, abandoning that cynicism was a fundamental challenge to the system of control.

It has long been argued, in fact, that cynicism was a significant part of the totalitarian system. Hannah Arendt observed in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* how total commitment to a political movement in which the movement is understood to embody all that is true, leads to complete cynicism about the truth. It is simply what the ruling party declares it to be in any particular circumstance, at any time. When this is taken to be the case, anything and everything becomes possible. There is no separation between the party's interest from the truth. The party's power enforced through terror is the truth. Cynicism is the standard operating procedure.

What I observed in East and Central Europe of the seventies and eighties was a transformation of this cynical attitude, in a more benign situation, the cynicism of the masses after Stalinism. The newspeak of everyday life replaced ideology and terror as the support for Party rule. People found that they had to use the official language and at least outwardly follow an official script to get on with their mundane everyday pursuits. They publicly accounted for their personal ambitions with

notions of "building socialism," "serving the working class movement," and the like. They displayed the appearance of loyalty to the system with little or no conviction in a wide variety of ways.

Havel describes this process in his now classic essay, "The Power of the Powerless." He tells the story of the green grocer who takes part in the legitimization process through disbelief and one day withdraws his support. The grocer put in the window of his shop the sign "WORKERS OF THE WORLD, UNITE," "along with the fruits and vegetables." He voted in meaningless elections and carefully did not say what he thinks at political meetings. Havel shows through an experiment of the imagination that not only is this individual's well being dependent upon these little acts of tribute to the official order, but that the order itself is dependent upon these acts. When people answered exam questions in schools and universities following the official prescribed truth, rather than with what they themselves knew to be true, when in preparing a passport application, a biographical sketch was presented to the authorities in the terms of the international solidarity of the proletariat, rather than in terms of a personal desire for adventure, when in seeking a promotion, a case was made for the contribution of the applicant to the building of socialism, instead of a desire for a better or easier life, it was most often the case that both the representative of Party-state and the individual seeking official favor knew that the rhetoric of officialdom was actually a mask for what was actually going on. Yet, by going through the masquerade, the official order was sustained.

In some ways, this cynical game of everyday life, a cynical acceptance and resignation to the facts of power, with the utilization of newspeak, does not seem very exotic. After all, the use of euphemism by those in power and those who are subjected to power seems to be a general characteristic of all state and corporate bureaucracies, as the universal appeal of the works of Kafka underscores. The arrogance and acceptance of bureaucracy is not a cynical game specifically of

totalitarian societies. What was distinctive about the cynicism of the totalitarian system was its uniform logic and its unitary enforcement, its systemic application in a large scale complex society. For my studies of the politics and culture of Eastern Europe, this difference was essential. It helped explain the distinctive qualities of post-Stalinist totalitarian culture and its opposition.

On the other hand, for studies of the political culture of the United States and other Western democracies, the similarities are most telling. When I turned my attention to the problems of political culture in my own country, I was struck by the fact that an everyday cynicism also seemed to play a significant role in sustaining the existing relations of power, and the cynical arrogance of the powerful is not unknown in liberal polities. This was particularly striking in the political campaigns of 1988, but it is obvious in the day to day functioning of such government bureaucracies as those of social welfare, education, defense and immigration and naturalization, as well.

In the campaign, George Bush promised no new taxes, when both he and most informed citizens well knew that new tax increases were inevitable. Yet, he made the unfulfillable promise and a significant portion of the electorate made its political choice on the basis of it, acting politically on the basis of a fairly clear deception. Commentators, both in the popular and academic media, in turn, analyzed the effectiveness of the deception, rather than criticizing it for what it was. The politician, the electorate and intellectual observers all acted cynically, and after the inevitable became a reality, after the tax increases were enacted, the cynicism continued with all seriously discussing the political ramifications of Bush's "broken promise." The disbelieved slogan of '88 had become a central political reality of the 90's.

In a parallel fashion, cynicism pervades many large scale social institutions, for example in our schools. There is a general sense that there is something fundamentally wrong with American education, numerous reports seem to indicate that we are falling behind other countries in our ability

to prepare the younger generation for the challenges of the post-industrial political economy and culture. We are in the words of a Department of Education study, "A Nation at Risk." Yet, the public discussion about the problems of education seem to be less about teaching and learning and more about ancillary matters of education: about how education is to be paid for, and about how group cultures are to be represented in the curriculum. And these are expressions of not very subtle codes. For some conservatives, all the problems of education will be solved through privatization, and for some on the cultural left, a multicultural education, a rainbow curriculum, will solve all problems. The discussions about education on the right has been a part of its anti-government campaign, and on the political left, about the politics of sub-cultures. Even the measures of educational achievement are cynically considered. The politicians, the public, and the commentators all seem more concerned with test scores than with literacy, mathematical capabilities and knowledge. There seems always to be a hidden agenda in the politics and practices of education.

There, of course, were and are great differences in how cynicism functions in a liberal order, as opposed to a tyrannical one. Indeed, the cynicism of Stalinist and post-Stalinist regimes are completely different, and the cynicism of the post-cold war era is decidedly different from the cynicism before the transformations of 1989. Yet, the centrality of cynicism in contemporary public life is a common element. The cynicism in the United States is less systemic than in the previously existing socialist system. But as in the old socialist order, it too functions to support the powers. By confusing criticism with cynicism, the capacity for an alternative politics is diminished. With the assumption that all politics is corrupt, political resignation results, not opposition. By cynically approaching public discussions about the workings and problems of social institutions, social resignation prevails, not reform directed social action. By exercising the responsibilities of a govern-

ment post without taking them seriously, they are not serious in their consequences. The pursuit of the public good through state and social action, then, becomes a mere facade for the pursuit of private interest and the pursuit of ideological agendas.

The cynicism in the former Soviet bloc and the former "free world" was supported by the political configuration of the cold war. The lies people told themselves and told each other were linked to the power struggles of the period. They made sense with reference to these struggles. During the cold war, there was an understanding in the United States that some of the most brutal dictatorships were included within the so called free world. To paraphrase Orwell, slavery had become freedom. This kind of cynical usage made sense because it was set within the manichean contest between the United States and the Soviet Union. People became accustomed to official lies linked with top secrets, and as they became accustomed to this usage, they also came to expect domestic lies as well. This was especially the case in the politics of race. As the civil rights movement made substantial progress in overturning the legal supports of racism and as overt racism became socially unacceptable, more elliptical measures were politically enacted to express a racist political stance. From Richard Nixon's campaign for law and order to George Bush's infamous Willie Horton ad, a cynical set of codes has been used to communicate racist messages in apparently non-racist ways. This reached its cynical heights when David Duke, a former leader of the Klu Klux Klan and a former member of the American Nazi Party, ran as the Republican candidate for Senator in the state of Louisiana, winning a majority of the white vote, on a civil rights for whites platform.

There was a coherence in these cynical practices, as there was in the cynicism in the existing socialist societies. People used their cynicism strategically and with significant mutual understanding. Although this made open public debate about pressing social and political problems

difficult, if not impossible, when the difficulties were overcome, the results could be spectacular. Thus, those who dared to speak the truth in East and Central Europe played such a key role in the demise of the Communist system, and the truth tellers among American writers, most prominently Toni Morrison, by poetically revealing the existential and historical dimensions of American racism, also have had profound cultural, if not political, impact.

In the recent past, cynicism was part of a whole which people came to recognize. In the old Soviet Bloc, the whole and the recognition was enforced by the repressive apparatus of the Party-state. In the West, the whole was less reliably enforced and the recognition less certain but it existed nonetheless. People went along with the cynicism of the powers when it came to geopolitics, in electoral politics and in some aspects of the politics of everyday life. The cynicism of both the East and the West supported the functioning orders of actually existing capitalism and socialism. It did so in a classical fashion, recalling the inner logic of the cynical impulse.

The first cynic, Diogenes, was a social critic. He questioned the pieties of those in power. He was cynical about their pretensions and the acceptance of their pretensions by others. Cynicism became an apologetic force when the pieties of those who criticized the powers, the social critics such as the Christians in Roman times, were questioned along with, or even worse, instead of the powerful. It was in a sense a short intellectual move with long political and cultural implications, from critique to apology.

We observe this sort of transformation in post-war America. At the time of the cold war consensus, to be cynical about the pieties of communism in the East and anti-communism in the West, presented a simple and real critical alternative to the prevailing cold war logic, the humor of Lenny Bruce and the songs of Tom Lehrer serve as popular examples. But when those pieties began

to be challenged, the cynicism about those who challenge was the opposite of critical, the humor of the later Mort Sahl and Jackie Mason comes to mind. It's one thing to mock and doubt the truthfulness of the racist, but it is something completely different to have similar mocking doubts about those who oppose racism. If cynical doubts about those who oppose an injustice are equated with doubts about those who enforce the injustice, or if the enforcers are believed while the critics are doubted, then the injustice likely will go unchallenged. The high cynicism of geopolitics then becomes the cynicism of everyday life. This seemed to be the prevailing cultural attitude of the Reagan-Bush years.

The appropriate critical intellectual response to this attitude is to reaffirm principle, to make discriminations between the lame and the convincing, to follow Havel's advice to "live in truth," i.e. to speak and act in public according to perceived truths. This is the clear intellectual response to the generalized cynicism by the conservative, who is concerned about the cynicism which erodes the social order and the wisdom of custom and habit, and by the social critic, who perceives that cynicism has become an obstacle to change. For, such cynicism is the opponent of both a principled order and social change.

Things are different now. The cynical structure has changed, leading from implicit understandings supporting domination, to explicit confusions undermining both the powers that be and their opponents. The cold war is with us no more, and the politics of left and right no longer help organize political action and opinion. The cynicism is still with us, but it is of a free floating sort. The two superpowers no longer face each other in sublimated moral combat, and the coherence in the logics of the political left and the political right now are less compelling than their incoherence.

With the collapse of communism and anti-communism, a generalized cynicism detached from organized political culture is upon us. It is the cynicism of the unaffiliated and the confused, not of either the critic or the apologist. I believe that we hear so much today about the cynicism in American society, and elsewhere, not because cynicism is particularly new or has increased, but because it has changed. It is still a significant problem, but it is a problem in a new way.

I have thus far considered three kinds of cynicism: critical cynicism, the cynicism of the powerful and the cynicism of resigned. I have tried to show how critical cynicism turns into cynicism of the powerful and of the resigned, and how resignation supports the powerful in our most recent political past. We now are experiencing a related type of cynicism, of the confused.

People continue to be cynical, believing that beneath political appearances there exists an underlying reality, but they have no sense of what the nature of that reality might be. It no longer is structured by the communist and the anticommunist powers. Only narrow self-interests and a disordered set of ideologies remain. Confusion is ubiquitous. It comes in the most malignant and in relatively benign forms, from civil wars of Eurasia and Africa to the election campaigns in California and Virginia. But the attempts to explain the confusion do not make coherent sense. There are the attempts of xenophobia and a broad variety of neo-nationalisms and of neocommunism, of market magic and of the benevolent state. Cynicism comes to reduce all politics to business (i.e., "they are all in it for themselves") or goes, as well, in the opposite direction, all business is reduced to politics (i.e., "its all a matter of who you know").

We seem to be observing a cast of characters who are performing together on the same stage, playing different scripts. It is unclear how the performances relate, and all too clear that performance and not real public action is being observed. This is how the political leaders with easy



answers gain their appeal. And even they are very confusing. The public seems to demand easily understood answers to complex political problems, and the politicians naturally deliver them the demanded goods. Yet, once these are delivered, it is all too clear that they are shoddy products, further indicating that politics is a corrupted enterprise. The situation is assured to produce profound disappointments, and it is self-generating.

As Americans went to the polls last week, this is the sort of cynicism that could be observed. There was a general disgust with government, a sense that "it is part of the problem, not the solution," this, two years after a Presidential campaign in which the public chose the political party that promised governmental solutions to complex social and economic problems. Although the rapid change of opinion was, to be sure, stimulated by the apparent ineptitude of the Clinton administration, it was probably just as much a result of a confused oscillation of cynical attitudes.

Normally it would have been expected that the Democrats would do relatively well in this midterm election, following past experiences. The economy is in relatively good shape, and there were accomplishments by the administration. Yet, the Democrats were decisively rejected, victims of a general antipolitical mood in the electorate. There is a clear sense of betrayal among significant segments of the population, especially in the South and in the West. First, Bush betrayed them when he raised taxes, now Clinton betrayed them when he proved not to be a "new democrat." They now perceive him as just an old fashioned and ineffectual liberal, more interested in power and its perks, isolated from the real concerns of ordinary people. Yet, this bitterness has less substance than is usually acknowledged. Just as Bush's broken promise of no new taxes is less than it seems, so are Clinton's failures. They say as much about the state of the electorate and the general state of our political culture as about the nature of a political leader.

Voters chose Clinton as they pretended to believe him, when he promised simultaneously to solve the problems of the decaying infrastructure, stimulate the economy, enact health care reform, reform welfare and lower taxes on the middle class. He knew that all this was not possible, even as he made his promises, and the bulk of the public probably realized that they were voting for the pretense rather than for a real promise. But, when the thing they knew was too good to be true, proved not to be, they felt that they were somehow betrayed. Clinton could not do something for nothing using the government, so they chose the Republicans to do something for nothing against the government.

Americans know that they are in a radically new geopolitical situation and a new economic situation. Yet, they want their geopolitics to be as simple (though not as dangerous) as they were during the cold war, and they want their economics to be as comfortable as they were when America dominated the world economy. Hoping does not make it so. That a significant part of the American public ignores this indicates that we are quite like the citizens of the previously existing socialist societies who somehow hope to reestablish the securities of their old failed system. People are confused and they look for easy answers. They support those who provide them with these answers, and then resent those whom they have supported because the answers have proven not to be so easy. They start down the confused cynical path by questioning those who say that political problems of our day are complicated, and they end by being cynical about those who promise easy solutions to complex problems. Since there is no dominant power that confines this cynical spiral, it is both more apparent than the cynicism of our recent past and less easily controlled.

It is also less easily addressed. I'll illustrate this point by relating to you an exchange I had recently at a public lecture in New York.

As I was preparing these remarks, I had the good fortune to attend a lecture by Adam Michnik at my university, the New School for Social Research. Michnik is an old friend and in a sense a New School colleague of long standing, since he received an honorary degree from us in 1984 and especially since he and I worked together on an international oppositional initiative in the mid and late eighties. He is in New York, as a visiting professor, commemorating the tenth anniversary of these activities. (Significantly, from the point of view of Berlin, we granted him the honorary degree as a way of commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the University in Exile.) At his major public lecture during his stay with us, Michnik delivered a text entitled *Dignity and Fear: A Dialogue with a Friend from Belgrade*. Inspired by an essay by Nebojsa Popov, he delivered an open letter to "his friend" about the problems of nationalistic hatred. He spoke as one critical intellectual to the other, commending Popov, a severe critic of Serbian excesses, for saying no to xenophobic horrors. "The intellectual must never fail to defend his own nation when it is threatened by its own people."

I listened to his talk with deep admiration. Here was one of the true intellectuals of our times, commending a colleague for taking a stand against a great injustice. Echoes of Zola and the Dreyfus affair were clearly discernible, the intellectual committed to truth against the prejudices of the ignorant. Indeed, it was people like Michnik during the communist period who reminded us that intellectuals can still matter. In Havel's terms, and with Havel, he spoke the truth and acted upon it, and, in the process, he helped create a democratic movement that ultimately helped to defeat the cynical powers of totalitarianism.

Yet, as Michnik spoke, I was struck by doubt. Somehow it seemed that the time of grand intellectual gestures against the lies of tyrants may be over. I asked him if he thought that the intellectual still had a role to play. I asked him if he thought that the simple act of speaking the truth

in public, writing articles and delivering open letters were effective ways to oppose the threats of xenophobic nationalism in the post-communist world.

He gave the expected answer. It is not, he counselled, a question of effectiveness. When Thomas Mann wrote his famous lecture to the Rector, he did not consider whether his protest would have an impact. He simply acted with honor and honesty. He spoke the truth, the primary responsibility of the intellectual. At the same time Mann composed his letter, most Germans adapted themselves to the rising power of Nazism, with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Yet, while Mann could not possibly be effective in that political climate, it is important, nonetheless, that he told the truth in his letter.

This was classic Michnik, a classical response of an intellectual moralist. As an individual citizen, I could not be anything but in complete agreement. But as a sociologist of cynicism, I, as an observer of the social drama and not only as an actor, have reservations. It is not that I think that prominent intellectuals should act differently now, that their dedication to the truth should be qualified. It is, rather, that I believe that we must come to understand that in the present cynical environment it has become quite easy to make a political stance, a grand gesture, and far more difficult to be intelligible about pressing, but not necessarily highly dramatic, social and political problems. And because confusion, and its cynicism are central problems, the actions of intellectuals probably need to take on new forms, or at least a different strategic dimension.

When I wrote *The Cynical Society*, in the mid and late eighties, it seemed to me that the central problem of cynicism was related to my professional occupation, as a malady. Americans had learned their sociology too well. A sociological reductionism had come to dominate our politics and culture. There was no appreciation of the vocations of politics and culture as significant ends in themselves, everything was being reduced to the social structures of economic interests. The project

of the intellectual in response to this sort of situation, should be, in my judgment, to act on principle.

Telling the truth of principle may not always have the consequences it had in Eastern Europe and the price paid for the telling may not be as great, but it is no less important. Such truth telling makes it possible for the existing institutions of democratic practice to be remembered, and with such remembrance people can act in ways that help to reconstitute them. The major response of intellectuals to cynicism, I thus believed, should be truth telling, as Michnik proposed.

I still think that this is important, but believe that the changes in our geopolitical and ideological force us to consider an additional dimension - time. I have a sense that our political culture is moving too rapidly, just when we should be slowing down. There is a need to address our confusions, to make sense of our changed world, and this takes time.

There is no need to mourn the demise of the cold war and the super power conflict. The collapse of the ideological left and right is an opportunity for political creativity, not necessarily the end to meaningful politics. Yet, because the geopolitical moorings of politics of the last fifty years have been annihilated and the ideological guidelines of politics of the last two hundred years have been disrupted, we, as citizens, need to take time to reconsider our positions. Intellectuals need to slow things down so this will be possible. Not only telling the truth, but looking for the truth is essential in a time of confusion. Getting people to slow down and ask questions becomes just as important as providing answers. Indeed it is the easy answer, the quick fix, which is a fundamental commitment of the confused cynic, from Perot to Zhirinovsky, and their followers, from the ultra nationalists of the former Yugoslavia to the neo-communist of the former Soviet Union.

Taking time to think, of course is no simple matter. Just like, it is no easy matter to tell the truth. When Michnik declares that the responsibility of the intellectual is to speak the truth and when Havel declared that living in truth was the most profound challenge to the communist tyranny,

serious political and philosophical problems concerning "truth telling" were being avoided in order to underscore an important practical point. When people avoid the regime of the lie, they fundamentally undermine it. When I suggest that taking time to think is an important antidote for today's cynicism, I also am not facing up to serious complications, sociological and technological ones. For, we live in times in which the old adage, "time is money," is increasingly salient. In the post-industrial economy time is increasingly the basis of power and wealth. The one who can move or process information more rapidly than the other prevails. Further, beyond such a material argument against deliberateness, there are dominant cultural forms, from television to popular music, which accustom people to speed up, not slow down. And even further, the consumer culture of advanced capitalism valorizes instant gratification, not enduring pleasures. In such a situation, deliberate thinking is a difficult achievement.

Yet, it would be a mistake to overdramatize the problem. There are institutions which help us to take time out and support deliberation: universities, foundations, research institutes, etc., and there are institutions that help link the work of the professional intellectuals to a broader public: journals, public television and radio, libraries and some religious institutions. There is a field that presents an opportunity for practical action.

I obviously cannot analyze the problems and prospects for critical intellectual action in this field in this presentation. This will be a part of a long term project on which I am presently working on the role of intellectuals in democratic societies. It suffices to point out here that the institutional supports for deliberative action are problematic. To some degree the prevailing economic and political pressures on the universities and other institutions potentially supporting deliberation move in the direction of instrumental activity, to prepare the young for the job market, to do the research that has immediate practical applications. This is evident in the nature of the financial support of

these institutions and the developing professional ethos within them. Yet, we still can observe that there are places for people to slow things down, and pose a question, directing themselves to the task of provoking the general public to question both the quite evident abuses of authority and the easy cynical interpretations and remedies of such abuses.

Before closing, I would like to say a few final words about today's cynicism. Up to this point, I have focused on the underlying formal aspects of cynical culture and its relationship to the configurations of power and ideology during the cold war and after. I would like to conclude with some reflections on an oddity of the political content of cynicism, its reactionary tendency. Throughout the old Soviet bloc, communists are returning to power, and in the West a *laissez faire* politics of a fairly extreme sort is ascendent. These two tendencies lead to the oddest results here in Germany, with a nostalgic politics apparently pulling left in the East and right in the West. Yet, I do not think that these odd opposing tendencies really have much to do with the left and the right. Rather, they are, in my judgment, desperate attempts to avoid confusion in confusing times. Even if the old order is not remembered with unambiguous fondness, people understood the rules of everyday life and they yearn for this lost understanding. They become convinced that there is only corruption and lies outside of this understanding, and they are easily manipulated. Thus, the answer to cynicism and its consequences is the critical approach of the intellectual. His or her effectiveness is an important issue and not at all certain. Given all the problems intellectuals have in democratic societies and the problems democracy has with intellectuals' pessimism would be in order if it were not likely to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. But perhaps that is the qualified conclusion of a naïve American.

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**Juli 1996**