

CINISM CLASIC, CINISM MODERN ȘI IMPLICAȚII PENTRU PROCESUL DEMOCRATIC

KYNICISM, CYNICISM AND IMPLICATION FOR THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Several scholars state that one of the biggest problems facing our democracies today is cynicism. Inspired from the ancient Greek philosophy, cynicism is different from the ancient kynicism. While kynicism claims a life lived according to nature, in complete harmony of body and soul, cynicism involves a life lived in suspicions and distrust. Kynicism and cynicism both criticize the political process; both do not trust politics or political figures. The distinction between kynicism and cynicism is due to the fact that a cynical person rejects any kind of convention and despises what he considers to be false judgement, insisting on living his life according to nature, while cynical a person has not initially rejected social conventions and the system of values shared by society; the education process in our society makes him confused and skeptic regarding the value system shared by society and makes him notice the relativity of social conventions. The way chosen by a kynic implies a life lived according to a specific ethics with specific moral laws, while the way chosen by a cynic implies a life with no morality and lack of values.

Key words: kynicism, cynicism, enlightened consciousness, false enlightened consciousness, morality, democratic participation, democratic implication.

I. KYNICISM

The word cynicism as we know it comes from the Greek word “kyon”. Kynicism as a philosophical way of thinking and living was created by Anthistenes, a disciple of Socrates. The word comes from the name of the place where Anthistenes’ disciples used to meet, a place located somewhere near the hill of Lycabet (in Greek, meaning “dog”/”white”/”fat”). The word “dog” reminds, also, of Diogenes from Sinope, who used to be called “the dog”, an allusion at his way of living (Diogene Laertios 1997). Without having a well organized scholar system, the school

survives until the Third Century B.C. Kynicism defied any convention or social norm, the kynic pleaded for the natural way of living, blaming the social norms imposed by conventions which were considered to be against nature. The kynical ethics assume that life's goal is happiness and happiness can be achieved by a life lived according to virtues; kynicism involves an ascetic way of practicing virtues (Diogene Laertios 1997: VI, 11). Anthistenes claimed that there are no epithets which can be ascribed to any kind of things; you can not say that "one man is good" but "man is man" or "goodness is good". Anthistenes' conclusion was that there were no general conceptions, but individual perceptions (Vlăduțescu 2001: 138).

Anthistenes, first, was a student of Gorgias', then of Prodicos', then of Hippias' and, finally, of Socrates'. He urged his own students to become Socrates' disciples. It means that the kynical school existed by the time when Socrates lived. From Socrates he learned the perseverance and, assimilating his emotionless way of living (*apathia*), Anthistenes defined a kynical way of living. Socratic but also sophist can be considered: the interest for controversy as a method, the focus on ethics and the elimination of physics from the study of philosophy, the urge to an emotionless way of living (*apathia*), the refusal of hedonism (which made him idealize the natural state of mind and way of living, as opposed, from a moral point of view, to the civilized one), the praise of virtues; all of these were converging to the same idea of philosophy seen as *paideia* (Vlăduțescu 2001: 192).

Diogenes from Sinope is a disciple of Anthistenes', which promoted a way of living based on an existence at the brink of survival and on a supreme contempt of social conventions and principles. He used to distinguish between the spiritual and material life, but not opposing them because, as he said, one could not exist without the other. Nothing in life, he used to say, can flourish without a continuous practice, but a well organized and ruled one; thus a practice without use is twice as harmful to man: first, because it's done in vain and second, because it estranges the person involved from his own nature (Vlăduțescu 2001: 192). Although an adept of freedom, Diogenes from Sinope does not exaggerate, insisting on the fact that *society cannot exist without laws and, without rulership, there are no benefits from the human community* (Vlăduțescu 2001: 192).

The real virtue is achieved through perseverance and it is not inherited. Diogenes considers himself a citizen of the universe (*kosmopolites*), emphasizing a rulership for the whole universe (organised by nature and not by conventions). Kynicism, as Diogenes sees it, resembles a separation the individual from the universal, isolating the latter by emphasizing the first.

Kynical philosophy is substantiated on the following principles:

1. Happiness consists of life according to nature.

2. Happiness is something which can be achieved by anyone who wants to involve himself in a spiritual process of education.
3. The essence of happiness consists of a process of self-consciousness, aiming towards the ability of living happily even when circumstances are adverse.
4. The process of self-consciousness aims a virtuous disposition of spirit.
5. The happy man, so designed, is the only one who is really wise, self-sufficient and free.
6. Conventional things, necessary for achieving happiness under circumstances such as health, fame, political power, have no natural value.
7. The first obstacles in achieving happiness are the false judgements and false consciousness along with the emotional weakness risen from these false judgements (Algra, Barnes, Mansfeld, Schofield 1999: 624).

Happiness is connected to a self-consciousness, education and rejection of conventions as a basis for values and virtuous character. The whole Hellenistic philosophy manifested a common interest in the self-preservation process of achieving happiness; their intention was that to make happiness essentially depend on the character and beliefs of the agent, thus, minimizing and rejecting its dependence on external contingencies. It is very possible for Antisthenes never to have really met Diogenes but, however, Antisthenes' writings and his interpretations regarding Socrates most likely had the strongest influences upon Diogenes' philosophical development (Algra, Barnes, Mansfeld, Schofield 1999: 625). There are no authentic lines preserved from Diogenes. His existence is absorbed in the anecdotes he provoked. In them he became a mythical figure (Sloterdijk 2001: 197). He tried to change to role of conventions (*nomos*) and substitute the real values derived from the rational understanding of nature (*phusis*) with them. Through his diatribes and through his way of living, which were seen as something natural, he tried to eliminate the false conventions. Any other kind of conduct which was not closely related the elementary necessities of nature, was considered wrong and consequently criticized.

Diogenes was considered to be a shameless person (*anaideia*); shame (*aidos*), on the contrary, was considered to be a quality without which a civilised life could not been possible. Shame served as a penalty against anti-social conducts and, at the same time, as a firm basis for a decent life. Later on, *aidos*, gained another meaning, more referred to manners than to morality (those kind of conventions bound to social conduct). Diogenes' shamelessness was especially opposed to this latter meaning of *aidos*. Reducing real norms to the natural ones, kynicism disengages from inhibitions and preconceived ideas. The kynical way of living aims for a life in virtue and focuses on discipline with the goal of self-satisfaction in a positive sense kind. Education aimed for body training in order to be healthy, a frugal diet, simple and modest clothes and literary

memorizing (Diogenes Laertios 1997: VI, 70-1). This philosophy argued that body and spirit were connected and they mutually influenced each other. This connection between body and spirit and the fact that they influence one another is a Socratic idea. But the emphasizing of bodily interdictions is a kynical idea. According to the kynical philosophy, one can be happy only if he does not depend on the satisfaction of the body; the less he depends on his bodily pleasures, the happier he will be. A kynical person does not need anyone or anything to be happy (Dekker et al. 2006: 20-21). However, the kynics state that a healthy body is compulsory for a virtuous spirit.

The stoics argued that the kynical virtue is a shortcut towards stoic virtue. Kynicism can lead to a virtuous way of living because a life lived in the kynical fashion (abstaining from passions, limiting one's self necessities to the rudimental ones, removing preconceived ideas and conventions as elements that can disturb reason) represents a virtuous life as stoics used to imagine, and such a person will lead a virtuous character.

The relation between the education process and life according to nature seems to be more problematic. Education implies deliberate practice, shaping and imagining what is or isn't naturally given. The critics regarding the fact that Diogenes wanted to reduce human nature to its animal stage were unfounded because the ethical theory described by Diogenes can be conceived only by assuming that human nature is rational and rationality represents the process entrusted with disengagement of preconceived ideas and conventions. On the other hand, Diogenes insisted on the fact that conventional and civilized people forgot one important thing. Animals, for instance, do not create for themselves needs which they cannot satisfy themselves, because it is not in their nature. Humans, endowed with rationality, need special education such as to be self-sufficient, a quality belonging to any kind of animal. Human beings can achieve self-sufficiency only through an education process.

There are three difficulties regarding kynic philosophy:

1. there are few written documents which have been kept and inherited;
2. that is why, relating only to stories and anecdotes, it is hard to define a kynic philosophy;
3. kynical principles can seem childish compared to the more sophisticated stoic and epicurean doctrines (Algra, Barnes, Mansfeld, Schofield 1999: 624).

Due to the fact that kynicism didn't leave behind an elaborated, written doctrine, some of kynicism's characteristics were uncovered in some other authors' writings affiliated to other philosophical schools. Diogenes' and other kynics' intention was not to eliminate any kind of rulership, but to criticize the Greek political conventions of that time. Their critics proved that a lot of conventional values are vulnerable, insisting on the rational capacity of achieving happiness,

independent of external elements. Thus, they passed on to the Hellenistic philosophers the idea of a “wise man”, who is self-sufficient and unaffected by emotions.

II. CYNICISM

Several scholars claim the most important problem the democratic world is faced with today is cynicism (Chaloupka 1999; Pharr and Putnam 2000; Capella and Jamieson 1997, Dogan 2005, Rijkhoff 2007). Sloterdijk states that the discontent in our culture has assumed a new quality; it appears as a universal diffuse cynicism (Sloterdijk 2001:3). Studies struggling with this problem often focus on the possible sources of cynicism like political corruption (Pharr and Putnam 2000, Capella and Jamieson 1997). Sloterdijk describes two kinds of cynicism:

- Kynicism – as a subversive practice, motivated by the self-preservation desire in the time of crises, a critical, ironical philosophy;
- Cynicism – as a kind of shameless, dirty realism without regard for conventional moral inhibitions (Chaloupka 1999:171; Sloterdijk 2001:193; Rijkhoff 2007:3).

Another classification divides cynics into three different categories: the negative cynics, the less involved and the critical cynics (Dekker et al. 2006:40-46). This classification is based on the relation between cynics and critics in a democratic society. Being a critic citizen in a modern democracy is a positive sign of democratic maturity. Criticism can help establish new forms of political action, like activism, protest and referenda (Pharr and Putnam 2000; Rijkhoff 2007). Responsiveness diminishes when people lose faith in the entire political class and in the entire democratic process. When criticism becomes negative cynicism, hopes and expectations diminish, generating, in the end, lack of participation and lack of implication.

Cynicism destroys the citizens' trust in the political process and in the political figures (Capella and Jamieson 1997: 141). Political cynicism reflects the absence of trust and describes a negative political atmosphere where criticism is not used in a constructive way. Peggy Schynes and Christel Koop define political cynicism as the individual attitude based on the conviction that political figures, public institutions and the democratic system as a whole are incompetent and immoral. (Schynes and Koop 2007).

Kynicism (the motif of self preservation in times of crisis) claims a virtuous, self-sufficient way of living, insisting on self-consciousness as a way of achieving happiness. The kynical person does not need anything or anyone else to achieve happiness, if his entire life is dedicated to this goal. The cynical person is different from the kynical one. The kynical person rejects any kind of conventional constraint and any kind of false values such as money, fame, power, while the cynical

person is characterized by lack of values and absence of trust (Dekker, 2006: 22). The kynical person rejects political power because he wants to live his life according to nature and according to natural laws only, while the cynical person, although accepting social conventions, has lost his trust in the efficiency and morality of these social conventions. The kynical person rejected the social conventions from the very beginning, considering that a happy life is a life lived according to nature. The focus here is the morality of the natural laws. The cynical person has accepted the social conventions, he has considered them useful in achieving happiness but, due to the repeated failure of the whole system, he no longer trusts the political process or the political figures (Capella and Jamieson 197: 141). Cynicism implies the absence of trust in the competence, efficiency and morality of the political process, generating pessimism (Sloterdijk 2001: 11). Sloterdijk argues that every social group builds itself a system of values, thus, its morality is interlinked with the desire to achieve a greater good for that itself. Understanding that the morality associated with the group is not universally valid has as a consequence the loss of trust of the group in the whole value system. Cynicism rejects the values and the ideals due to the disappointment created by the failure of the whole system. This rejection can create a sentiment of alienation because, when a certain person cannot locate the source of his value system neither in society nor himself, he can embrace other paths, such as imposture and deceit (Lane 1962: 408).

Sloterdijke states that kynicism is the antidote for cynicism (Sloterdijk 2001: 193). Kynicism implied a virtuous and active life. However, Sloterdijk himself claims that, in our contemporary society, there are few institutions where life can be lived according to the principles of kynicism. Furthermore, he states that he doesn't believe that kynicism represent a solution for the problems our society is faced with, but he tends to believe that the lethargy characteristic to the latter could diminish by embracing a way of life in unison with kynicism.

The biggest issue of our contemporary society is education. The purpose of education, today, seems to be an external one in relation to the individual, a fact which triggers the counterfact for self-sufficiency and self-consciousness. If the kynical philosopher sought happiness in life and the road for achieving that goal was a road of self-education, where in the end, self-sufficiency and self-consciousness were attained, the cynical person, the more educated he'd be, the more insecure he would be. Education, today, is no longer a self-sufficient process, but is a process consisting of storing and accumulating information and knowledge, in such a way that, what we call knowledge today is no longer a solid basis for shaping values. Educated people become cynics because as they acquire more education, their lives become more uncertain (Rijkhoff 2007: 8). The profile of a cynic seems to be following one: an individual with a higher or intermediate level of education, well aware of the looseness and relativism of values, which is why he alienates himself and does

not want to be an active part of the social life anymore.

III. IMPLICATION FOR A DEMOCRATIC PROCESS

Both the kynic and the cynic are alike in their criticism towards the political process; neither of them trusts politics or political figures. The distinction between kynicism and cynicism is due to the fact that the kynical person rejects any kind of convention and despises what he considers to be false judgements, insisting on living his life according to nature, while the cynical person has not initially rejected the social conventions and the system of values shared by society; as a result of the education process imposed by our society, he came to be confused in regard to the system of values and observing the relativity of conventions.

Table 1.(Rijkhoff 2007: 9) shows some of the kynical characteristics in comparison to the cynical characteristics. Cynics are not optimistic, but pessimistic, kynics are shameless and rudeness. Kynical actions are oriented towards achieving self-preservation, while cynical actions are completely selfish. If the road taken by a kynical person ends with the gaining of enlightened consciousness, the cynical person, the more he educates himself, the less certain he is, because the information he accumulates is not capable of forming a real system of values as a strong basis for future actions. That is why the kynical person will gain enlightened consciousness, while the cynical person will have only a false enlightened consciousness.

The cynical person lives his life without actively involving himself in anything, his reaction towards the world around him being one of rejection. If the kynical person has critical opinions regarding the political system, the cynical one would be passive and he'd manifest lack of trust in the political process and figures.

Political knowledge represents a necessary condition in order to understand all the connotations of the democratic process and to ensure a well informed and active electorate. All the democratic countries consider it absolutely necessary for citizens to have minimum knowledge regarding the democratic procedure and the political process. Political knowledge not only influences the percent of the citizens' participation to the democratic process, but also influences the quality of the democratic process by forming beliefs, strong opinions and political attitudes. Sloterdijk claims that the difference between kynics and cynics resides in their political knowledge. Kynics were well educated and they possessed real knowledge, while cynics possessed only false knowledge, false enlightened consciousness, which could not provide a real basis for future actions.

Table 1. Characteristics of Kynicism and Cynicism (Source: SANNE A.M. RIJKHOFF, *The Dark Side of Politics: Kynicism, Cynism and Hope*, paper presented at the 4th Annual European Consortium for Political Research Conference, 6-8 Sept. 2007, Pisa).

| Kynics | Cynics |
|--|--|
| * Absence of trust | * Absence of trust |
| * Shameless, rudeness, brashness | * Lack of values |
| * Intention for self-preservation | * Selfish actions |
| * Appreciation of crisis in politics | * Low expectation of competence |
| * Optimistic emotionality | * Pessimism, lost belief |
| * Lively action | * Sticking to something one doesn't believe in |
| * Knowledge | * Knowledge cannot provide a firm basis for action thus makes them miserable |
| * Enlightened consciousness that is cheerful, life-affirming and full of vitality. | * Enlightened false consciousness |

CONCLUSIONS

The kynic would be a participative citizen, while the cynic would be a non participative one. Kynics would have critical opinions, but they would still manifest themselves as active citizens. That is why, the best solutions for modern democracies would be to change the cynics into kynics, meaning to change the uninformed, non implicated and non participative citizens into well informed, implicated citizens (Rijkhoff 2007), because cynicism is a real threat for our modern democratic societies (Goldfarb 1991:1).

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