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Sharon A. Stanley, *The French Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Cynicism*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012. 225 pp., footnotes, bibliography and index. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). Online ISBN: 9781139035682. Hardback ISBN: 9781107014640.

Review by Elena Russo, Johns Hopkins University.

Sharon's Stanley succinct and elegant study on cynicism in the Enlightenment and in contemporary times wants to be a vindication of the relevance of the Enlightenment to today's practice of democracy. Stanley's argument is that the Enlightenment's critique of religious and metaphysical foundations involved a disillusionment about reason, truth, nature and the social bond that resulted in distinctive forms of cynicism which are echoed in the contemporary postmodern questioning of universal ideals. In other words, a more attentive reading of Enlightenment authors—one more open-minded than what passes for intellectual history among postmodern authors who use the Enlightenment as a caricature and a foil—shows that nuanced and astute thinkers such as Diderot were the true precursors of the critique of ideology that is bandied today as a product of postmodern thought. Stanley wants to highlight the continuity between the two traditions, rather than the stereotypical opposition that has long been the dominant reading.

Of course, this book is not the first to point out that the Enlightenment's philosophes were those who produced their sharpest self-critique. Edited volumes by Keith Baker and Peter Hanns Reill and Daniel Gordon have gone there already.^[1] For Stanley, however, demonstrating that the Enlightenment went far in its anti-foundationalist soul-searching is just a step towards arguing that the forms of cynicism, both Enlightenment and postmodern, that emerge from that gesture ought to be put to use in order to develop a more sanguine yet critical practice of democracy.

The book is divided into two main parts. The first and longest is devoted to a close reading of several key works by Diderot, Cr billon, Montesquieu, and Rousseau that highlight several issues: the philosophes' struggle to overturn religious and metaphysical "prejudice" without falling into the radical skepticism that rejects the possibility of making any valid claims about the world; the presence of a cynical critique of civilization unsupported by the belief in the goodness of nature that characterized the ancient Cynical tradition; the coexistence of a redemptive faith in uncontentious forms of sociability and the awareness that all sociability may be undermined by hypocrisy, selfishness, exploitation and desire for power; and the belief in the civilizing role of commerce coexisting with the fear that commercial self-interest risks undermining the social bond at its core. All those forms of double bind go into shaping a picture of the Enlightenment as fertile ground for the development of cynical attitudes, akin to those that emerge today from the postmodern critique of ideology.

A specific discussion of the latter is to be found in the second part of the book, alongside a defense of the positive role that a limited application of cynical maxims and principles may play in today's democratic struggles (primarily in the United States, but not limited to that country). Stanley's position is that, contrary to commonly held opinion, which equates cynicism with disaffection and destructive disengagement from the public sphere, a certain amount of cynicism need not be detrimental to a robust commitment to politics, both on the part of politicians and of ordinary citizens. Quite the contrary,

Stanley argues that a cynical awareness is part and parcel of the democratic experience and a necessary condition for its healthy practice.

The French Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Cynicism is thus a successful example of the ways intellectual history of a serious, scholarly kind may be incorporated into a theoretical discussion of issues relevant to contemporary political science and contemporary society. One might quibble and ask whether this reading of early modern authors does not force them into the mold of postmodernism, whether the imposition on contemporary political culture of a conception of the Enlightenment that is drawn from a set of issues predetermined by contemporary debates does not risk becoming circular and non-falsifiable in a Popperian sense. I would answer the hypothetical quibbler that this may be a risk worth taking. To put it differently, a certain amount of anachronism may be productive and fruitful, and perhaps it is the price to pay for making thinkers of the past relevant to today's debates.

In defense of the approach taken here, the close readings of Diderot's *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* and Crébillon's treatment of the libertine character are extremely well argued, informed, relevant and perceptive. They are also a pleasure to read, and Stanley's prose throughout the book is clear, crisp and enjoyable. It is something of a surprise to find Claude-Prospère Jolyot de Crébillon included among the representatives of the Enlightenment, but it is a welcome one, as Crébillon's satirical, "situational," dark comedy of libertinage is more sophisticated and nuanced than the better-known, more schematic work of Laclos. Crébillon would seem to belong to the tradition of seventeenth-century moralists and satirists (such as La Rochefoucauld and La Bruyère) rather than to the Enlightenment properly speaking.

Such categorization, however, may well stand being revised, especially in light of Stanley's focus on the cynical questioning of individual morality and social well-being. In fact, seventeenth-century thought is particularly relevant, indeed formative, with respect to the issues explored here. The very popular Jansenist moralist writer Pierre Nicole and the Enlightenment pioneer Pierre Bayle did already show, well before Diderot and the *Encyclopédie*, that a society built on a mere self-interested simulacrum of virtue (that is, on *amour-propre*) may, for all intents and purposes, look and function exactly like one built on authentic, disinterested Christian virtues.[2] Only God would know the difference. This boils down to a pragmatic approach that makes foundations irrelevant. Bayle went even further when he suggested that a society of atheists would be indistinguishable from one of believers (*Pensées sur la comète*, 1682).

Stanley makes Crébillon's libertine characters dialogue with Diderot's protagonist in *Rameau's Nephew*, so as to highlight the philosophes' awareness of the dark side of sociability, its "inevitable entanglement with deceit, duplicity and manipulation" and the realization that personal advantages "might accrue to individuals who mastered the art of duplicity" (p. 76). That awareness tempted the philosophes to embrace the full, modern cynical attitude, which consisted, Stanley argues, first in understanding the reality of society's theatricality, falseness and hypocrisy, and second in giving up the hope of reforming it according to normative ideals of a more authentic "nature" (the existence of which, as Stanley perceptively shows, Diderot put seriously into question). The *philosophes* thus acknowledged the centrality of those vices with lucid self-consciousness, on the one hand because they saw them as inescapable, and on the other because they came to believe that one "stands to profit more from complicity than from moral purity" (p. 76).

This is too quick a summary of one particular moment in the rich and nuanced readings found in this book, yet it represents the method adopted here of setting aside issues of genre, localized narrative strategies and periodization, and treating heterogeneous texts as part of one big philosophical dialogue across genres, characters, and authors. This method works most of the time and yields provocative and insightful results. It does not quite work, however, in the readings of Rousseau, which remain generic

and a little superficial, particularly when it comes to the issue of Rousseau's cynicism and Diderot's approach to it.

While it is true that the *author* Rousseau denounced the cynical underside of modern society (as Stanley points out, Emile's education was crafted so as to prevent the development of cynical traits, and "Emile is ultimately the antinephew, an anticynic," (p. 129)), Rousseau's position towards cynicism was more complex than outright opposition. One interesting aspect of such complexity is the fact that the author "Rousseau" is in his turn denounced by Diderot as a duplicitous, masked character, a fictional persona that the "real" Rousseau has cynically adopted in order to play the literary, philosophical field and make a name for himself. In fact, Stanley acknowledges that several scholars have suggested that "Diderot may have crafted the nephew as a caricature of his estranged friend" (p. 129).

To a certain extent, Rousseau himself confesses the deliberate, constructed nature of his authorial persona, though of course he denies that this move is in any way cynical and insincere. There is however more to Rousseau than *Emile*. The *Rêveries* in particular present a fascinating cynical deconstruction of gift-giving and generosity (a major issue for eighteenth-century authors who lived largely in a patronage system, and Rousseau certainly did, even as he claimed to reject it) and of Rousseau's own personal attitude towards exchange and obligation (particularly in the sixth *Rêverie*). Moreover, both texts of Rousseau's maturity, the *Dialogues de Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques* and the *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* engage fully with the cynical position, and it is reductive to describe (as Stanley does) Rousseau's retreat into himself in the *Rêveries* as simply a way to carve out a personal space and to preserve the integrity of his own self against worldly corruption.^[3] A more thorough reading of this text reveals that Rousseau the "hermit" is a derivation, a product of his enemies' plot, which "embraces" (Rousseau often uses the verb *enlacer*, which also means to tie up, to ensnare) and paralyzes him entirely. Rousseau never disengages completely from society. He is never alone because he is under constant surveillance, but—this is important for Stanley's argument—he acts *as if* he were alone, and it can be argued that such "as if" is constitutive of cynicism as Stanley describes it elsewhere in the book.

Finally, a few words about the last part, which is at times a little tortuous, as much of this section is dedicated to explaining contemporary conceptions of cynicism as they apply to current political struggles, and the reader eagerly awaits for Stanley to spell out her own proposal about what role cynicism ought to play in today's political culture, which she does in the concluding pages. My (moderate) impatience came from the sense that no description of current tactics and maneuvering, however sophisticated and thorough, will ever be adequate, because the political landscape is changing so fast and in such increasingly radical, disturbing ways, under our own eyes, and technologies and means of communication are evolving at such speed, that any attempt to describe and evaluate them becomes immediately obsolete.

Stanley's ultimate aim in the book is, however, one of moral principle. It is to explain how it is possible to salvage political commitment from today's overwhelming cynical disenchantment about the motivations of politicians and the electorate. Her proposal is that the eighteenth-century *philosophes*, and Diderot in particular, experienced forms of cynicism similar to ours as a problem first, but that they were ultimately able to incorporate cynicism and put it to use in ways that are highly relevant to today's political climate. She thus suggests that if we accept the basic tenet of cynicism that "no escape is possible from the hypocrisies and corruption of worldly existence" and that "democratic politics is fundamentally a realm of *tactical* maneuvering," cynicism will lose its destructive edge, because cynicism will be seen as "a tactic rather than an identity or a mode of consciousness" (p. 203, emphasis added). Taking her cue both from Diogenes's adoption of tactics as *modus dicendi*—a way of adapting rhetorically to hostile circumstances—and Michel de Certeau's conception of tactics in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Stanley highlights the vital importance of tactics, which are "temporary and adaptable practices, rooted in an uncertain, contingent world" (p. 204) but do not preclude the kind of optimism of the will that Gramsci invoked as the twin ally of the inescapable pessimism of reason.^[4]

We may welcome the book's modulated, qualifiedly optimistic conclusion, and placing that conclusion under the patronage of a perceptive and subtle interpretation of the Enlightenment as the one we find here is quite convincing.

NOTES

[1] Keith Baker and Peter Hanns Reill, ed., *What's Left of Enlightenment? A Postmodern Question* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2001) and Daniel Gordon, ed., *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Routledge, 2001)

[2] *De la charité et de l'amour-propre* (1675), in *Essais de Morale*, ed., Laurent Thirouin, (Presses Universitaires de France: Paris, 1999).

[3] Both were published in their entirety in 1782 in Geneva.

[4] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

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