

## **Parody and Sincerity in Western Political Culture**

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### **SATIRE AND CYNICAL REASON**

Almost thirty years ago, Peter Sloterdijk's *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* ("Critique of Cynical Reason") appeared and rapidly became one of the more influential and controversial philosophical works of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (at least in its native Germany). The book is too manifold to summarize quickly and I will not attempt to do so here. But what it is principally remembered for is its argument that the project of enlightenment has resolved into a "universal, diffuse" condition of cynicism.

Sloterdijk's characterization, it should be noted, principally concerns what he terms the "upper echelons of

the elevated superstructure.” That is, his diagnosis is directed at the “pernicious realism” that adheres to the “charmingly mediated alienation” of the western intellectual elite. For this elite, enlightenment’s centuries-long project of unmasking the contingencies of human understanding has left no onion layers left to peel, no secure grounding from which to adjudicate truth and falsity. The project of universal truth-making and truth-telling has become so various and contentious that it has very nearly destroyed its own nominal purpose. As Pierre Bourdieu would have it, the articulation of truth has become little more than a game of positions, a field of competing forms of capital. So here is our “crisis of representation.” Worse yet, according to Sloterdijk, we intellectuals continue to take ourselves seriously. Would-be critical enlighteners of today have forgotten their roots in ancient *kynicism*, “in the powerful traditions of laughter in satirical knowledge” that he argues originally nourished western critical enlightenment. Thus the companion of the elite’s rapidly receding faith in epistemic universality is the rise of mirthless, respectable, calculating epistemology whose philosophical expressions are so often “the mere administration of thoughts.”

Although Sloterdijk targets people with sociological positions similar to our own, it is interesting that the *Critique* has often been interpreted as passing judgment on the “open immorality” of the present. In other words, its indictment of intellectuals is rather conveniently

displaced into a universalist critique of the preponderance of (postmodern) cynicism in contemporary culture. In the sphere of politics, for example, Sloterdijk's thesis has been connected to what is very widely perceived to be a rising trend of political disinvestment in contemporary liberal democracy in Europe and the United States, whether evinced by mundane political apathy or by growing enthusiasm for charismatic populism. Whether Sloterdijk's critique of cynicism is truly applicable to contemporary political sentiments is a question I cannot answer here. What is certain is that Sloterdijk is himself very concerned with the relationship between affect and critique.

Recall that Sloterdijk seeks to retrieve the *Freiheit*, the cheekyness, he regards as lost within the schizoid diffusion and earnest professionalization of modern subjectivity. Cheekyness is perhaps not a total antidote to cynicism but it is, for Sloterdijk, a recurrent necessity. Without perhaps intending to do so, Sloterdijk creates a positive alignment between satire and sincerity. As though the satirical mode of laughter represented a deeper, less alienated/mediated commitment to life and to truth than serious, sophistic(ated) critique. Put in other terms, it seems that laughter is a refuge of sincerity in this era of "enlightened false consciousness."

## STIOB

This point may help us to better understand certain recent developments in western political culture. For the

past three years, my collaborator Alexei Yurchak and I have been tracing the spread of a particular mode of parody on the margins of western politics. This mode of parody attracted our attention because it seemed to us in many respects uncannily analogous to a form of parody widely present in late socialist societies in the 1970s and 1980s. Since there is no English word for this mode of parody, we use its Russian slang designation, *stiob*.

*Stiob* refers a particular technique of parodic over-identification, the method of which was to inhabit the forms and norms of authoritative discourse so perfectly that it was impossible to tell whether the imitative performance was ironic or sincere. The performance in question might be theatrical or it might be textual but in all cases it never fully divulged or unambiguously signaled a parodic purpose. *Stiob* was particularly germane to late Soviet socialism because of the party-state's obsessive emphasis on the formal orthodoxy of its discourse. As I've discussed elsewhere with respect to censorship in East Germany, late socialist states typically invested considerable energy into the negotiation of perfected languages of political communication as a means of constituting perfected socialist citizens. Yet, rather than this desired effect, late socialist authoritative discourse most often resulted in expert overcrafting of every aspect of language. For example, if one read front-page articles in *Pravda* or *Neues Deutschland* or any other central party organ in the 1970s, one encountered an exceedingly

technical, cumbersome and not seldom absurd language filled with long sentences, proliferating nominal structures, perplexing passive constructions, and repetitive phraseological formulations. If one listened meanwhile to speeches of local communist youth leaders one heard texts that sounded uncannily like quotations of previous texts written by their predecessors (which is, in fact, precisely how they were produced). The pressure was always to adhere to the precise norms and forms of already existing authoritative discourse, and to minimize subjective interpretation or voice. Yurchak terms the result of this pressure “hypernormalization,” a snowball effect of the layering of the normalized structures of authoritative discourse upon themselves.

Under such conditions, the aesthetics of *stio*b made sense. Faced with authoritative discourse that was already recursively overformalizing itself to the point of caricature, *stio*b’s parodic technique of overidentification sent a more potent critical signal (one articulated in the language of form itself) than any revelatory exposé or gesture of ironic diminishment could have. Put another way, since the state seemed more invested in the repetition of formalized political discourse than in that discourse’s capacity to serve as a medium for literal statements about the world (following Austin, Yurchak terms this condition “performative shift”), it seemed increasingly senseless to engage political discourse at the level of literal meanings, whether critically or affirmatively.

Also, while the state easily identified and isolated any overt form of oppositional discourse as a threat, recognizing and disciplining the critical potential of overidentification was more difficult because of its formal resemblance to the state's own language. For this reason, stiob rarely occupied or promoted recognizable political positions—it existed to some extent outside the familiar axes of political tension between party and opposition, between socialism and liberalism, aware of these axes but uninvested in them. The hypernormalization of discourse in the late socialist party-state can thus be interpreted as enabling the performativity of stiob.

This may all sound quite familiar to you. Overidentifying parody has become recognizable in western popular and political culture over the past decade as well. In the United States alone, we would single out the extraordinarily popular and politically relevant “fake” news television shows *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, the parody newspaper *The Onion* and the activist hoax group, The Yes Men, all of which utilize overidentifying parody to varying extents as a performative mode. The rising frequency, variety and popularity of these stiob-like interventions have caused us to explore overformalization and hypernormalization in contemporary liberal-democratic political discourse as well.

I do not have the time to reconstruct our entire analysis in detail but the essence of our argument is that the changing institutional and ideological organization of

political culture in the United States (and elsewhere) has consolidated discursive conditions analogous in certain respects to late socialist hypernormalization. For example, we discuss how the monopolization of broadcast media production and circulation via corporate consolidation and the adaptation of news journalism to digital media have actually made political and economic news content significantly more homogeneous and experientially repetitive. We look at the cementing of liberal-entrepreneurial consensus in political news analysis (paralleled by huge growth in business journalism and the rapid thinning out of investigative reporting); we examine, in keeping with the general professionalization of political life and the central importance of 24/7 news cycles for political communication, how political performances in the United States are increasingly calculated and formalized, concerned more with efficient and precise political messaging than with riskier forms of political debate and communicational improvisation. Finally, we discuss how the collapse of Cold War geopolitics unsettled late liberal political imagination by removing the constitutive alterity of communist threat. Although various imaginations of Muslim and Chinese antiliberalism have partially filled this void, we interpret these positionings as unstable, a condition that has forced western liberalism into the situation of defining itself in increasingly abstract and untethered ways (where, for example, as in the military interventions in

Iraq and Afghanistan, mediating relentless fantasies of liberal freedom has seemed much more governmentally significant than guaranteeing actual conditions of freedom, whatever those might be, on-the-ground). The increasing emphasis upon positive image over substance demonstrates the slippage of contemporary imperial liberalism into the self-referential discursive habits of late socialism. Where such images and messages become highly repetitive, formalized and predictable, the fundamental discursive basis requisite for stioib arises. Overidentifying parody requires an overformalized discourse environment whose norms and forms are so experientially familiar that the performer no longer needs to overtly signal that s/he is embarking on an act of parody.

If classic late socialist stioib addressed the hypernormalization of post-Stalinist communism, then late liberal stioib can most appropriately be heard to address the apparently paradoxical condition where “progressive” modes of liberalism find themselves in increasingly uncomfortably intimate forms of codependency with the ravenous antipolitics of neoliberalism. It is quite agonizing to watch progressive liberalism struggle to ground a political imagination let alone an ethics of citizenship that is not, in this era of globalization and financialization, simply submission to neoliberal corporatism and consumerism. In the United States, we could call this Obama’s dilemma, where the truly



cynical reason of neoliberal necessity has all but suffocated the hope discourse of two years ago. But the prioritization of individual rights and autonomy that represents the core of liberal political imagination is itself the quicksand here. The more that institutionalized progressive liberalism struggles to differentiate itself from neoliberal market imaginaries, the more it realizes that guaranteeing the freedom and security of the globalized elite to which it belongs means sacrificing the security and freedom of everyone else. Realizing that progressive liberalism has no clear alternative to neoliberalism to offer anyway, the range of authoritative discourse increasingly narrows. There is overwhelming liberal consensus, in supranational Europe as in the United States, but the polarities of Left and Right liberalism seem at once blurry and increasingly predictable. Meanwhile, if one seeks other political messages they are scattered, more noise than signal. Neosocialism scarcely exists outside the often violent welfarist imaginaries of the radical right. Anarchism ekes out an existence in abandoned places.

It would perhaps be too simple and pessimistic to say that despair, apathy, disinvestment necessarily advance under these conditions. There is hope although the times are not hopeful. But the suspicion of political insincerity and automaticity is everywhere on the rise. Indeed, Sloterdijk's book is in this respect a remarkable performance of its own premise. In terms of our work on

stiob, it seems unsurprising that overidentifying parody is becoming an increasingly effective vehicle for political engagement (and perhaps also for political sincerity). As in late socialism, where political discourse has become more performative than literal, inhabiting the forms and norms of authoritative discourse becomes a special kind of transgression, literally a kind of “squatting” within the language of power. Let me just offer one example from a paper that Yurchak and I are currently writing, an example that we feel reflects evidence of the increasing movement of stiob aesthetics of parody toward the heart of western political practice.

### **JÓN GNARR AND BESTI FLOKKURINN**

We have in mind *Besti Flokkurinn* (“The Best Party”), the Icelandic political movement which was formed in late 2009 and widely derided as an amusing but otherwise inconsequential “joke party” by the Icelandic political elite, until it won the municipal elections in Reykjavík on May 30th, 2010 with 34.7% of the popular vote, gaining 6 of 15 seats on the city council, only two short of an absolute majority in Iceland’s capital. With 83% of Reykjavík’s registered voters (nearly a third of Iceland’s total population) going to the polls, this was an event of national political significance in Iceland and Iceland’s Prime Minister Jóhanna Sigurdardóttir described the Best Party’s victory as a shock and perhaps the “beginning of the end” of Iceland’s traditional

four party system. The Best Party's victory also provoked a burst of international news coverage much of which focused on Jón Gnarr, *Besti Flokkurinn*'s founder and party leader, and for the next four years, mayor of Reykjavík.



Jón Gnarr, Mayor of Reykjavík and Founder of The Best Party.

The news media, like many Icelandic politicians, speculated variously about Gnarr's intentions. What was certain was that Gnarr was a well-known Icelandic actor, writer, and stand-up comedian. Other nuggets of information emerged in the international news media including that Gnarr never completed secondary school, was a juvenile delinquent, punker and anarchist, the son of a communist policeman, and the husband of pop singer Björk's yoga teacher and best friend. Both media and political culture reached the conclusion that Gnarr was seeking to lampoon the Icelandic political system responsible for the bubble-and-burst collapse of the Icelandic banking system in 2008 which generated six times the debt of the Icelandic GDP in a matter of months, gutting the Icelandic currency and leaving Iceland one of the most highly indebted countries in the world. This reflects, in part, statements that Gnarr made about the Best Party in the months leading up to the election.

For example, the week before the election, Gnarr gave an interview to an English-language Icelandic news service in which he described the Best Party as an effort to provoke a "cultural revolution" in Iceland but above all as intervention that sought to deprive people of the comfort and sense of wellbeing they derive from categorization and labels. Gnarr explained,

Political discourse is all dead and vapid. I've never been interested in governance or politics. (...) I've listened to all the empty

political discourse, but it's never touched me at all or moved me, until the economic collapse. Then I just felt I'd had enough of those people. After the collapse and its aftermath, I started reading the local news websites and watching the news and political talk shows—and it filled me with so much frustration. Eww! So I wanted to do something, to fuck the system. To change it around and impact it in some way.

The stio b sensibility in Gnarr and his collaborators' language is quite clear—the assertion of the emptiness of political discourse, the Best Party's disinterest in traditional political labels and ideologies, the recourse to overidentifying parody (or, in Gnarr's terms, “fun”) as a more efficacious and performative mode of engaging an ossified political system than literal politics. These emphases carried over into what the news media often glossed as a “mock” political platform (journalists focused especially on the Best Party's repeated promise to ditch its election platform the moment they were elected, just like other political parties, only more openly). The Best Party platform was popularized through an Internet campaign video to the tune of Tina Turner's *Simply the Best* that circulated widely in Iceland.

In the video, collaboratively produced with several prominent Icelandic musicians, Gnarr either satirizes the traditional form of the political campaign video or presents a sincere political message. You should decide for yourselves:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxBW4mPzv6E>  
*Besti Flokkurinn's* Campaign Video.

Over time, in a variety of other speaking engagements, it became evident that some of the more curious features of the Best Party's platform sought to address (or at least to highlight) significant social, political and environmental issues facing Iceland and the world today. The polar bear for the zoo addressed, for example, climate change and the current Icelandic policy to shoot polar bears that swam to Iceland avoiding melting ice farther north. The free towels at swimming pools aimed at attracting greater European tourism, obliquely invoking an obscure EU regulation that for a pool to be classified as a "spa" free towels had to be provided. The drug free parliament referenced an extended rhetorical analogy Gnarr filled out later that the relationship of Icelandic political culture to the nation was one of a substance-abusing father to his injured yet enabling family. The news media also made much of a report that Gnarr refused to enter into a coalition government with any party who had not watched all five seasons of HBO's acclaimed crime drama, *The Wire*.

Gnarr's first several months as mayor have continued to confound observers at home and abroad as to his political methods and messages. His frequent invocation of the wisdom of a classic Finnish comic book series, the Moomin elves, has caused opposition politicians to roll their eyes or to stare at him uncomprehendingly. His mayoral welcome address to the Iceland Airwaves music festival last August was a brilliantly

surreal piece of governmental discourse, beginning with the scientific improbability of anyone being in Reykjavík, followed by a discussion of Schrödinger's cat and the reality of existence, a report on his ongoing conversations with elves and trolls and their advice that Iceland would do well to join the European Union. He ended the speech abruptly with "I hope these thoughts shed some light on the history of Reykjavík and its culture." Also in August 2010, Gnarr led Reykjavík's gay pride parade in full drag, complaining that the real Jón Gnarr hadn't shown up as promised, accusing him of probably talking to elves and concluding, "This is what we get for voting for a clown in elections."

Gnarr's skillful manipulation of national and international media attention is another hallmark of the performativity of stio**b** as Yurchak and I have argued previously. Gnarr frequently plays upon his apparent unsuitability for political office in serious times as a method of attracting media attention to the party,

I like appearing as a simpleton, like when I gave a speech at the University of Reykjavík and shouted that I had risen from the ashes like the bird Felix. I was just waiting for some blogger type to correct me on that. That gets the party press and exposure, and as soon as they do, I can stand aside, laugh and let the facts or essence of what I was saying do the talking.

Could these instances not be treated as kynical performance? Indeed, Gnarr has proved himself very capable of modulating parody into sincerity, including a

moving speech last December in which he presented the 2011 Reykjavík city budget. In the speech, Gnarr mused,

What kind of party is The Best Party? I don't really know. We are not a proper political party. We are maybe more of a self-help organization, like Alcoholics Anonymous. We try to take one day at a time, to not overreach our boundaries and to maintain joy, humility and positive thinking. We are grateful for the chance we have been given, and we want our stay here to benefit the city and the people in it. Our motto is: humanity, culture and peace. We do not foster any other ideals or political visions. We do not share a predetermined, mutual ideology. We are neither left nor right. We are both. We don't even think it matters. (...) We often say that we aren't doing what we want to do, but what needs to be done. We have the opportunity to do several things that the conventional political parties hesitate to do. We do not have to answer for an ideology or wrestle a party base.'

We simply try to work as well as our conscience permits. And it is work, often very hard work. These are troubled times. Our society collapsed, and we are still dealing with the consequences. We need to make cutbacks for the third [successive] year (...) We are forced to reduce services, and increase the burdens of some. This is not a fun position to be in. Sometimes we have to choose the lesser of two evils. Is it better to deprive children than the elderly?

This budget contains many propositions that I would be happy to be rid of. But this is our situation. My hope is that we can achieve solidarity about these propositions, not just us elected officials but also all of us that inhabit this city—its employees and inhabitants. We can do this if we do this together.

We have so much. We have this wonderful country and all the opportunity it offers. And we have one another, to rejoice with and to comfort. We need not be sad. We can laugh, have fun and tell jokes. We can dress up and stage events to pass



the time. Smiling is free. We are still OK. Christmas is on the horizon, and then the sun will return. The future is bright and filled with possibility.

An Icelandic political scientist recently coined the term, “Gnarrism,” for this new mutation of stíob. Gnarrism is perhaps the best evidence one can find today of what stíob might look like modulated into a more literal political discourse that nevertheless holds deeply to what Gnarr describes as his “anarcho-surrealist” convictions. Not unlike the late socialist cases of NSK or Sergei Kuryokhin (mentioned in our previous article), Gnarr never categorizes himself or his political mission as a joke even if he is unapologetically ludic in his political method. Gnarr and *Besti Flokkurinn* utilize Facebook extensively as a method of remaining in dialogue with citizens concerning political issues. Gnarr often posts home videos there too, including a Christmas address in which he appears in a Darth Vader helmet topped by a red santa hat. Another recent post suggests again an ideological kinship for *Besti Flokkurinn* in Gnarr’s reference to <http://thefuntheory.com>, a website dedicated “to the thought that something as simple as fun is the easiest way to change people’s behaviour for the better.”



Still image from Gnarr's 2010 Christmas address.

If Gnarrism indeed represents an ideological position, it is clearly not Sloterdijk's modern cynicism nor is it the pure antipublicity of late socialist *svoi* (which is Yurchak's term for the late Soviet rejection of the bipolarization of speaking for or against the state). It seems instead an affective political ideology that, not unlike Sloterdijk's, equates the emptiness and ineffectiveness of contemporary liberal democracy with its earnest self-satisfaction. Rather than playing to affects of anger, of fear or even of hope, Gnarrism emphasizes laughter and

play. As Gnarr says, “we are the only species that laughs, so why should our politics not reflect this.”

A happy ending would be to say that Gnarr and his ilk reflect the restoration of cynical disruption in the face of the monopolization and hypernormalization of authoritative discourse in western political culture. This is an entirely plausible interpretation and Gnarr would doubtless be pleased at our act of “positive thinking.” But here is another interpretation. Perhaps Gnarr’s apparently literal appeal to the therapeutic power of laughter represents another level of performance. Perhaps *Besti Flokkurinn* is an even deeper parody of the affective turn in late liberal political ideology more generally, the same turn that has brought us the American Tea Party movement fueled by righteously indignant non-cynical affect at the fact of the slow but certain erosion of American power. In other words, suppose that the Best Party was a parody of the late liberal Sloterdijkian call for sincerity itself. With stioib one really never knows. And because what stioib does so well is to suspend literal meaning, I would hate to put a message in its mouth. Indeed, if we force stioib to deliver a message it might well cease to be such an effective vehicle of political sincerity, since its efficacy appears to depend upon the camouflage of ambiguity. My conclusion is rather simply to say that the increasing salience of stioib seems to me symptomatic of the discursive, institutional, and ideological conditions of contemporary western political culture. And like any symptom it invites and frustrates further efforts of unmasking.

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