Make them endure, give them space: On the loss of academic cynicism

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ABSTRACT

In this autoethnographic essay, I explore how an intersection of personal, cultural, intellectual and professional conditions led me to embrace a cynical attitude towards academic life and why I've come more recently to lose that cynicism.

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I ran into her recently at an invited lecture hosted by our department. We had not seen much of each other over the past few years. However, when I started my current job six years ago, we were very close. One of the most important things that drew us together in those years was a general cynicism about the world of academia (and the world in general) and a strong sense of gallows humour. We slowly worked our way through the usual gamut of colleagues and students wanting to chitchat before the lecture and came together near the buffet table. After dispensing with the ritual hugs, kisses on the cheeks and how are yous, she said to me: "Hey! I just heard from D___ that you were organizing a party for H__. "(H___was a colleague of ours who had recently been diagnosed with a serious and incurable disease). I replied: "Yeah. I decided to do it after wandering into the school lounge one afternoon and finding him there holding court with a group of grad students. I was blown away…" She then sharply interjected before I could finish: "Yeah because he clearly cares way more than you or I do".

If she had given me an opening like this to riff on how little I cared about grad students (which is almost never the case) and/or how annoying, anxious and draining I found them (which is still occasionally true) three or four years ago, I would have plunged in without a moment's hesitation. This time, however, I wavered at the brink. Then, to both of our surprise, I politely laughed and then took back up my story: "I was blown away by the fact that this man who had no reason to be there and every reason to be home pitying himself was there because he continued to see himself as part of a larger community and intellectual project to which he still had a great deal to contribute. I was blown away by his commitment, his

clear love for his students, his passion for teaching (here my voice began to crack a bit) and I knew then that these qualities were rare, inspiring and eminently worthy of recognition and celebration." She was clearly taken aback by my response. She knitted her brow, gave me a puzzled smile and said quietly: "I had heard that you had changed..."

This essay is written for a special edition of *Emotion, Space and Society* on narratives of loss in academia. In my experience, when we, as intellectuals, talk about loss, we tend to focus on three main kinds of loss: the loss of faith, a growing estrangement from the communities in which we grew up and the loss of close personal relationships. My story will follow a similar and perhaps even all-too predictable trajectory. The difference will probably be that mine might reverse the current. I will tell you the story of my growing alienation from a subject position that has defined my intellectual and affective responses to my lifeworld, my social identity and my major subcultural affiliations: the position of the cynic. This is a story, therefore, of how I'm becoming alienated from my alienated self.

What does it mean to be a cynic? In "Retreat from Politics: the Cynic in Modern Times", Sharon Stanley provides us with an excellent overview of how scholars have delineated the major characteristics of what she calls "the form of cynical consciousness". She begins with Peter Sloterdijk's now-canonical definition of cynicism as "an enlightened false consciousness". Modern cynicism, according to Sloterdijk, is a product of the rise of ideology or cultural critique in the modern West. Ideology critique began with belief that the representations and cultural institutions and practices produced by the dominant group were systematic illusions organized either to mask the violence, duplicity and hunger of those in power or to trick those who get the dirt end of the

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historical stick into minimally accepting and maximally loving their subjugation (Sloterdijk, 1987). As Stanley rightly points out, ideology critique in the case of, for example, pointing out how fashion magazines both position women solely as objects of the male gaze and perpetuate an emotionally and physically destructive ideal of the female body is best taken as healthy scepticism. Healthy scepticism, however, easily slides into cynicism because, especially once one consigns some notion of the sacred to the dustbin of history, there is nothing keeping us from critiquing all representations and all institutions and practices. As Stanley asks: "why should the game of unmasking stop at the critique of arbitrary power? The lesson learned from this unending game of unmasking might dissolve all social bonds in a fog of mistrust and suspicion. In this fog, the logic of cynicism becomes particularly seductive: in this corrupt world, it reasons, no one and nothing can be trusted." (Stanley, 2007: 389).

As many commentators have pointed out, cynicism as the loss of trust in traditions, representations and institutions is almost a natural defense mechanism in an historical period such as ours in which the metastasization of global capitalism has reduced almost all human relationships to acts of economic exchange, in which imperial wars are fought in the name of Enlightenment ideals of freedom and democracy and in which the dark arts of marketing, advertising, spin and branding have become ubiquitous to the point that they provide those of us who are fortunate enough to live in the wealthiest parts of the world with a new vocabulary for our fumbling attempts at self-formation and self-presentation. The problem, however, is that this loss of trust often results in a perverse complicity with the very system whose duplicity the cynic delights in exposing. Because the cynic views all utterances and acts as con games designed to maximize individual pleasure and power, looks upon all religious, moral and ethical principles with a jaundiced eye and views the world in general as corrupt, she is fairly quick to conclude that the easiest thing for him/her to do is to simply play along because there is no better game to play. Slavoj Zizek nicely expresses the complicit action-orientation of the cynic: "the formula of cynicism is no longer the classic 'they do not know it, but they are doing it', it is 'they know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it'." (Zizek, 1989: 28).

Cynicism, however, is never a closed intellectual and affective system. First of all, as Stanley points out, "cynicism is likely always to be partial and incomplete, not exhaustive of a person's consciousness." (Stanley, 2007: 406) In my personal experience, it has been eminently possible to be cynical about many things that go on in our world but to also to take great delight in all sorts of other things—the sound of my now-teenage daughter laughing as she talks about who knows what to her friends, the couple of cardinals who feed every day from my backyard bird feeder, the smoky and sexy timbre of my partner's voice, the playful verbal sparring with my favourite colleagues and students, the ability of great artists, intellectuals or athletes to do things that most of us could dream of doing—as well as to react with sorrow and anger over the hurts and injustices suffered by those with whom I share the world. Secondly, as Stanley writes, in his or her screeds against 'inauthenticity', 'lack of integrity', 'duplicity' and so on, the cynic "remain within the convention categories of "base" and "virtuous"…This the cynic retains a paradoxical investment in the very values he dismisses as naïve pieties, and the very virulence of the cynic's mockery betrays this persistent investment." (Stanley, 2007: 391).

Stanley's discussion here of the continued but disavowed investment of the cynic in "naïve pieties" and her choice of the adjective 'virulence' to evoke the violent and visceral reaction of the cynic towards his or her object of critique suggests that the psyche of the cynic is thoroughly melancholic and internally divided. As Freud and others have argued, the melancholic subject is one who has suffered the loss of an object, a person or a part of the self with which she identifies strongly. So strong is that identification that she fears that its loss will utterly destroy her. Because she fears her own destruction, she encrypts what is lost in the recesses of her psyche in hopes of keeping some part of it alive at the same time that s/he publicly denies its continued hold over her. As Ilit Ferber writes with such insight, "This laden state of destructive internalization, I argue, is an embodiment of the endless commitment and responsibility the melancholic feels towards his object. For the melancholic, the only way to keep the object is to destroy it." (Ferber, 2006: 69).

I was relatively fresh out of my PhD and settling into my new life as an assistant professor when I received an invitation to present my doctoral research on the media and the politics and poetics of cultural memory in contemporary Canada at a conference titled "The Presence of the Past" in Halifax. This conference was organized by the Association for Canadian Studies and, to my surprise and delight, they would be paying for my flight and hotel costs. This was not, however, the usual academic conference. As part of a more general project of public outreach, high school history teachers would be invited on one day of the conference—the day that I presented.

Now I've got to confess that my particular love–hate relationship with high school teachers was always heavily weighted on the right side of the antinomy. From my early teen years, I had always strongly identified with the strange mixture of punk anti-authoritarianism and nonconformism, GenX ironic and melancholic slackerism, art school Nietzscheanism, a post-60s love of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll (shorn of any transcendental overtones) and a diffuse commitment to the embrace of all of those subjectivities that Canadian modernity abjected that eventually became resold to us as 'alternative culture'. I wore the right clothes, had the right haircut, listened to the right bands and, most importantly, I had the right snarky, sarcastic, parodic and cleverer-than-thou attitude. Furthermore, I was also an avid reader (and a pretentious one at that). I read Marx by the time I was 14 but found him too earnest. I quickly gravitated towards those writers who've been identified with 'the dark side of modernity'—Nietzsche, Freud, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, Bataille, Artaud, Kafka, Henry Miller and so on. The combination of my cynical attitude and my belief, right or wrong, that I knew more than my teachers made my presence in high school classes an unpleasant experience for everyone involved. Eventually, my teachers and I worked out a tacit compromise—I would show up for classes and do enough work to be able to score the minimum mark required for me not to write the final exam. Once that happened, I would stop going to class and hang out in the library and read books.

Fifteen years later, I prepared to give a talk to the members of the same profession for whom I had such disdain in my teens. Over the years, however, I had mellowed a bit. Gone were the army boots, torn jeans and Dead Kennedys t-shirts. They were replaced by, for the lack of a better term, a metrosexual hipster look in which black and grey clothes were in heavy rotation and the only colour was generally provided by expensive and over-designed European 'street shoes'. I had toned down my sardonicism as well as a result of the dual experience of becoming a father and a teacher. Occupying both of these new roles made me recognize that while irony and sarcasm might be effective weapons of discursive self-defence against those in power once you're the one with power over vulnerable psyches, they are generally counter-productive and often even hurtful. Furthermore, I had been reading writers like Jürgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu and Antonio Gramsci who all emphasized, in very different ways, the responsibility of the intellectual to engage with the larger community. I was primed then to