

Nihilism Today: Enlightened False Consciousness

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Friedrich Nietzsche defines nihilism as the moment we have become weary of being human, when the highest values devalue themselves.¹ Nihilism is affective since it stems from a deep unhomeliness with our very selves, and it causes us to be estranged from our activities and from others. For Nietzsche, this is not a passive experience that we blame fate and the gods. Nihilism is due to a lack of willing to be human. Ultimately, it is what hinders people to will that life returns eternally. This eternal return is Nietzsche's epistemic-ethical challenge that dawns as a personal test for us to evaluate if we have been condoning nihilism: if life is to return eternally and in the exact same manner, how are we to respond to this? When we fret in face of the eternal return, we see our reactivity to life. Nihilism pushes us into comfort in the frivolous, distress and anxiety in disrupting the status quo, and, ultimately, discontent with ourselves. Parenthetically, this notion accentuates Heidegger's attribution of angst as a way of being's disclosure. As we take Nietzsche's message as a personal challenge to overcome our frailty and indecisiveness, we must progress towards realizing our contemporaneous decadent conditions that hamper us from willing life's return. What I seek to draw attention to is a contemporary face of nihilism prevalent in society. This is what Peter Sloterdijk characterizes as the enlightened false consciousness which,

is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and in vain. It has learned its lessons in enlightenment, but it has not, and probably was not able to, put them into practice. Well-off and miserable at the same time, this consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buffered.²

Sloterdijk mocks the enlightenment task by presenting its own decadence through today's enlightened false consciousness. He uses an oxymoron by putting "enlightened" and "false" together to hint at how we have failed to definitively reach true enlightenment. We may remember Kant's own distinction of enlightenment between the Age of Enlightenment and actual enlightenment. The failure to fully realize the latter may be surmised as humanity's history as, in Adorno's view, the slingshot to the atom bomb. Presently, we realize a novel form of Enlightenment's discontent—*we* have become this enlightened discontent.

I take this realization within the ambit of Nietzsche's presentation of nihilism that prompts some serious reconsiderations. We ought to critically reevaluate ourselves and how we allow nihilism to thrive in spite of today's fast-paced, technological society. Ironically, the very institutions that ought to foster critical thinking merely end up catering to the workforce by producing docile individuals. The market already has the strong hand in determining which courses are essential for tomorrow's

¹ See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), I:2 and 8; *The Genealogy of Morality*, in *The Genealogy of Morality and Other Writings*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), I:12.

² See Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 6.

success resulting to a global decline in enrollment in the liberal arts facing than the hard sciences. Docility, obedience, and compliance have become benchmarks of both graduates and employees, and applicants all scurry to update their LinkedIn pages with immaculate jargons and formal photos with the hope of getting at least one call from the tens of applications they submitted. Getting the job merely begins the cycle: weekdays for work; weekends for “living.” The weekday-weekend divide actually diminishes as what we can observe terrifyingly celebrated in media. If there is one thing refreshing in season-long TV series, it is how the characters congregate in a café or a pub more than once in every episode. These lives that seemingly rotate around conversations over coffee and alcohol are far removed from daily living—lifestyles unimaginable in today’s society, much more for the meager debutant in the game of real life. The clerk has become media’s ultimate celebration; the trivial bits of her work are concealed from the camera’s frame, leaving only the most enjoyable moments of her life for the audience’s attention.

In the sense that art mirrors reality, we have grown accustomed to the dark and celebrate prematurely at any sing of the light at the end of the tunnel. Often, I return to today’s emphasis of ideological regard of a turn from Marx to Žižek, from “not knowing and doing” to “knowing and yet still doing.”³ Contemporary society has given us much comfort at a price of individuality, subjectivity, and privacy. In desiring to participate in the public sphere – essentially virtually – subjectivity has given into the domination of the public gaze: from sharing the same contents, “reacting” to photos and videos of dream vacations and fancy meals, to trolling one another with endless and superficial argumentations. Being part of today’s public sphere taught us not to read the fine print and simply ‘accept all cookies.’ Comfort, convenience, exclusivity have become companies’ buzzwords to ensure constant purchase. These all are but signposts of decadence often dismissed for the sake of living in the 21st century. We have become blind to several elephants in the room: the blurring demarcation between public and private due to privacy concerns; the internet’s latent obscuration of truth and falsity’s distinction; and utter dependence on the number of “reactions” that dictate how nice our posts are, while we forget to live in the exact moment when those photos/videos were taken. The more we go beyond the body, the more we lose touch of reality. These are symptoms of nihilism’s contemporary form. We have learned to merely accept what is given and to aspire for the bleakest glimmer of light—yet we must be wary lest that light at the tunnel’s end be from an incoming train.

The enlightened false consciousness emerges as our avenue to preserve subjectivity. We fail to realize that our experience and knowledge of the world today is fundamentally shaped by mass and social media as what Niklas Luhmann highlighted;⁴ consciousness become self-conscious by passing through media’s public gaze instead of through experience of other consciousnesses. Media dictates what is accepted and what trends. This puts individuality at stake because of the current public virtual engagement in which no discourse suffices. Trolling and lampooning on social media have surfaced as the norm, leaving experts with no definitive say on relevant issues. Populist statements along with demagoguery greatly affect public opinion. Social media offer targeted advertisements for intensified campaigning. Politics today results to who has the loudest voice instead of the brightest opinion. Subjectivity is shrouded by the public gaze as consciousness resorts to riding the bandwagon. The question remains: is it still possible to arrive at a contemporary critical consciousness sans subservience

³ Cf. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, in *Karl Marx - Friedrich Engels - Werke, Band 23* (Dietz Verlag: Berlin[DDR], 1962), I.1.88, http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me23/me23_049.htm, and Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 30.

⁴ See Dirk Baecker, Norbert Bolz, Wolfgang Hagen, Alexander Kluge, *Warum haben Sie keinen Fernseher, Herr Luhmann? Letzte Gespräche mit Niklas Luhmann*, ed. Wolfgang Hagen (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2005), 80ff.

to public pressure? Retaining autonomy as we engage with society is vital for any reckoning of contemporary forms of nihilism.

If not for the celebrated clerk, media rattles out every possible narrative to get the audience's attention; from unbelievable love entanglements to rags-to-riches storylines, today's world has routinely capitalized on the lust for fiction, alienating us from our very aspirations. In a rather distorted way, this even extends to our covert desires. Violence, fixations, and vulgarity find their place beside other skeletons in the enlightened person's closet. If there is a fetish we ought to apprehend, it is our obsession with fantasy-formation, yet another symptom of nihilism today. We have become unable to avert our gaze from the light at the end of the tunnel to focus first on the next few steps as we grope in the dark. We need to remember that tripping in the darkness teaches us a valuable lesson. Today has become an age of instant gratification – promotions, accelerations, enjoyments – that takes away the balance between pain and pleasure. Comfort has become ideological and even pathological as we currently fail to appreciate difficulties; what does not kill us, makes us stronger. The enlightened false consciousness rejoices in lenience and simplicity, only rushing to get the week done to experience living during the weekend, and lives from fantasy to fantasy yet is blind to his very situatedness.

Nihilism today is blanket mindlessness. Through society's further complexification, we lose sight of our very own goals. We are tossed about by social wave and ebb and still lack the exuberance to radically alter concepts of everyday life: freedom and labor are taken as polar opposites and still not as twin vitalities for holistic development; discourse about gender-fluidity yet none about nationality-fluidity; economic success still banks on environmental expense; technological breakthroughs still treated as reservations for the wealthy than successes to be shared with the whole of humanity. Ultimately, the light at the end of the tunnel, the promise of achieving enlightenment, the utopias that guide us are nothing but bleak altercations of once again a contemporary face of nihilism. We need to be radical enough to change our concept of utopia—better yet, we need to be radical enough to transvalue the reigning values and concerns of today and tomorrow. Instead of mindlessness which merely maintains the status quo, we need to realize that memory and remembering leads us to an exuberant now. We need to remember once more our historicities, all the anguish we have gone through that made us the people we are today. The inconveniences we have experienced – be it major or minor – are all fundamental to our individual clamors against social injustice. They are our thrust to all our activities as we aspire for a better life, our enjoyment of leisure and toil in work, and even in our activity of giving voice to the voiceless. Our present mindlessness disengages us from our basic historicity and even so with our ultimate aspirations. A critical mindfulness allows us any reckoning with ourselves and with others, a clear vision of our distinctness from others and our thrust in aspiring for a better life. Subjectivity ought to once again assert itself in the face of pressure from the tantalizing public gaze.

To close, I draw attention to Sloterdijk's characterization of Diogenes, the laughing and serene masturbator in the Athenian *agora*: “With his public masturbation, Diogenes committed a shamelessness by means of which he set himself in opposition to the political training in virtue of all systems.”⁵ Maybe society needs more Diogeneses who is cynical to modernity's wave, who is cheeky enough to drop abstract burdens and to laugh at the farce of public thought. “Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently.”⁶ The public sphere needs the ejaculations of creativity and contestations to further strengthen and refine concepts vital to everyday living, like gold

⁵ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 168.

⁶ Rosa Luxemburg, “The Russian Revolution” (New York: Workers Age Publishers, 1940), Chapter 6, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/russian-revolution/ch06.htm>.

that is tested in fire or clay in the hands of a potter. Dissent stands as a bleak glimmer of hope to realize nihilism's tight grip on today's enlightened false consciousness—another light at the end of the tunnel? Only time can tell.