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Power/Cheekiness

Looking back on the first half century of the nuclear age, we can begin to plot the questions and answers that have had an absorbing effect in politics. If all of the extraordinary events of 1989–90 have been surprising, that may suggest we have missed some crucial aspects of this age.

These dramatic political events have not yet produced an analysis that would match the spectacle of the events themselves. Most analyses emphasize "popular will," "freedom," and the triumph of capitalism over communism, but each of these points had been undermined long before 1989 gave them a last breath. Even the briefest interpretation of these events deconstructs such ideological readings; for example, socialists frequently were on the popular side, as in South Africa, China, and most of Eastern Europe. Narrow, legalistic readings of freedom were put into question by the broad, cultural (and, sometimes, ethnic) character of many of the outbursts. And the "popular will" asserted itself so suddenly—especially in some instances in Eastern Europe—that such a will becomes a suspect explanatory device.

As I have been suggesting throughout this book, some of the most obvious, "commonsense" political positions have turned out to be less useful than we thought they were. Specifically, the claim that a straightforward concern for survival might underwrite a new antinuclearism encounters a challenge. The humanism this concern relies upon tends to break up, with rationalism giving way to irony and cynicism. In this chapter, I will reexamine this political terrain, noting especially how Jean

Baudrillard and Peter Sloterdijk can assist an understanding of this new and odd situation.

Humanism

Overall, the Western press and intellectuals explained these events in broadly humanistic ways, ignoring in the process some longstanding warnings. Foucault offers one of the most prominent (surely not the only) commentary on humanism as an explanatory device:

> This idea of man has become normative, self-evident, and is supposed to be universal. Humanism may not be universal but may be quite relative to a certain situation. What we call humanism has been used by Marxists, liberals, Nazis, Catholics. This does not mean that we have to get rid of what we call human rights or freedom, but that we can't say that freedom or human rights has to be limited at certain frontiers. . . .
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> What I am afraid of about humanism is that it presents a certain form of our ethics as a universal model for any kind of freedom. I think that there are more secrets, more possible freedoms, and more inventions in our future than we can imagine in humanism as it is dogmatically represented on every side of the political rainbow.[1]

A full review of humanism is far beyond the scope of my present project, but some correctives are suggested as an offshoot of the nuclear age. Surely, Foucault inaugurated a deconstruction of any assumed "depth humanism" that has broadened since his death; the use of elemental human impulses to explain political events has been problematized, no doubt irrevocably. Reliance on "truth-telling" as a political response also comes into question. This is not necessarily a matter of events being complex or deeply deceptive; after all, as Baudrillard suggests, our era can be described as one in which all is on the surface, without depth to plumb. In an era when a surface contradiction—not implying a determining structure, but operating just as it looks—dominates, we have responded by a peculiar compulsion for the truth, and with a naive confidence in authenticity.

A conclusion emerges from several of the discussions in this book, including Kateb's critique of the "survival" position (chapter 1), the issue of the warrior archetype (chapter 2), and the question of deterrence discourse that runs throughout the book. This conclusion, in summary, is that humanistic approaches have injured our ability to respond to this new and peculiar world. And they have injured our cognitive abilities, as well. Changes in the nature of power have been visible to theorists for a long time; now, these changes have erupted throughout the political

world, but have yet to set off a new analysis—one which might account for the new power lodged in *the event.*

As I discussed in an earlier chapter, Reagan's triumphs should have served as an introduction to a new moment of power, one in which an intense presence of the image produced a presidency Diane Rubenstein has called "the most perfect exemplar of Baudrillard's . . . simulation." The Reagan era matches each feature of simulacrum in "the neutralization of the signified by the code, the radical displacement of the referent by the model and the priority of reproduction over production."[2] While the Reagan age continued, critics from the left emphasized the simulation as its weakness, as a stasis funded by lies; frustrated by the end of activity *as they knew it*, the left assumed that nothing was happening.

Even in the early 1980s, however, Baudrillard had identified the tragedy of the left's waiting for events to propel themselves along the course the left had charted—that is, the world's propensity for a hyperreality that would soon erupt in unmistakable ways: "All we may expect of time is its reversibility. Speed and acceleration are merely the dream of making time reversible. You hope that by speeding up time, it will start to whirl like a fluid. . . . As linear time and history have retreated, we have been left with the ephemerality of networks and fashion, which is unbearable."[3] This is "unbearable" in terms of our predisposition to await and foment the unfolding of events; that is not the same thing as stasis or gridlock (or, on the other hand, the resolute fix of interests and conspiracy). This new order of events, of the world, may have been obscure when Baudrillard first wrote of it, but it would become unmistakable in the late 1980s.

Gorbachev's trajectory through recent years seems a fulfillment of Baudrillard's *Seduction*, not Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence* or Marx's *Capital.* The theme was challenge and seduction; offering the West what it asked for but could not bear to have (arms control first, then the change in the status of Eastern Europe), turning liabilities into triumphs (in the repeated Communist Party "catastrophes," many of which turned to his advantage, at least until the breakdowns of late 1990). China, Eastern Europe, and South Africa in 1989–90, the Middle East in 1990. The rules have clearly changed, and we are left to try to figure out what happened.

Faced with this list of important absurdities, twists, and reversals, we might look to political science for help; surely, that discipline would have developed some interpretive strategy for untangling the problems power brings forth. Such a project has emerged, but only at the margins of the social sciences, as in the works I have cited in this study. Political science has surely been attuned to the machinations of power, and that has been the fallback position of political analysts trying to talk about Gorbachev.

But political science has always relied on an underlying order—a signified—that is represented by power politics. Whether Marxist or democratic-pluralist, there had to be a base. It is only the rare political scientist who has noticed how completely actual politics can swirl around that presumption of interest.

At the same time, power is Foucault's theme in his response to humanism. The liberal or humanist wants to vault over power, superseding it by an appeal to a humanism that can establish critical distance. Foucault's cautionary note emphasizes that the idealist form chosen by the humanists allows power to continue on, in new and even more potent forms. The key to reestablishing a politics after that series of events has happened is in the "constitution of subjects," a topic long ago identified by Murray Edelman, a crucial figure in the emergence of postmodern analysis within political science:

> If politics is concerned with who gets what, or with the authoritative allocation of values, one may be pardoned for wondering why it need involve so much talk. An individual or group can most directly get what it wants by taking it or by force and can get nothing directly by talk. . . . The employment of language to sanctify action is exactly what makes politics different from other methods of allocating values. Through language a group can not only achieve an immediate result but also win the acquiescence of those whose lasting support is needed. More than that, it is the talk and the response to it that [measure] political potency, not the amount of force that is exerted. Force signals weakness in politics. . . . Talk, on the other hand, involves a competitive exchange of symbols, referential and evocative, through which values are shared and assigned and coexistence attained.[4]

The 1967 book in which that passage appears, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, was a major success and has educated a generation of students. But the generation of professors who assigned it did not move immediately to a recognition of politics as symbolic and discursive. Instead, they tied the symbolic to the manipulations of visible and well-known power, when they bothered at all with the realm of language. Edelman's work was read as an explanation of how dominant power had forestalled a march of events much better understood by structuralisms of interest and personality than by any new regime of rhetoric, narrative, and discourse: what Edelman calls "so much talk."

The difficulties of political science may not be of much interest in themselves, but they do set a direction for further inquiry. The much-maligned renewal of interest in French social thought surely implies a bypassing of American social science, a way of circumventing it. Of course, French thought encounters resistances of its own, as well. Frequently,

however, figures such as Foucault, Derrida, and Baudrillard have taken a different tactical stance with respect to the challenge of dominant modes of thought, frequently practicing the outrageous as an affront to a steadfast orthodoxy that yields none too easily to arguments it would recognize.

Rationalism and "Politics with Attitude"

I have been suggesting, throughout this book, that Baudrillard et al. might provide a useful starting point for political analysis and movement. At first glance, Baudrillard would seem to be the last outpost along the path of the demise of politics; he says as much, repeatedly. Still, it seems extraordinary to me that American readers have so often assumed that this put him in the camp of the "end-of-politics" theorists with whom he obviously had nothing in common. There seems to be an aesthetic of social thought in this country; rationalistic stylings imply seriousness, understatements suggest breadth, utopian goals and values stand for realism, and so on.

The aesthetic of political rationalism—more specifically, a rhetoric—assumes a certain directness of purpose, perhaps antidialectical in origin, but now more general than merely an antimarxist tactic. There is some reason, then, to choose Baudrillard as a keynote for a political response; much less likely a starting place than, say, political science, he ends up being a perfectly appropriate place to begin. It may not be so much paradox as irony that moves us toward Baudrillard—who has been so emphatic in claiming this end to politics—as a place to start a postmodern move on political space. Humanists conflate their tactical approach with all of politics; Baudrillard's response both criticizes and makes fun of their solemn voice-over.

These matters of style and rhetoric can, after all, be crucial. There is some evidence that Baudrillard has been wildly misread on this count. Calvin Thomas's important reinterpretation of Baudrillard's *Forget Foucault* makes just such a case. "For Baudrillard, Foucault's mistake is to allow his discourse to mirror flawlessly, and with its own panoptic perfection, a power that everywhere produces and reproduces the social as 'the visible, the all-too-visible, the more-visible-than-visible.' " Thus, what has been oddly read as a move to the right by Baudrillard turns out to be something altogether different: "Baudrillard wants to reveal to Foucault the postmodern abyss that opens up in his own discourse, to activate Foucault's will to disappear into that ironic space. This is Baudrillard's seduction of Foucault, his challenge to the death: against the power that is everywhere, the seduction that is elsewhere."[5]

"Elsewhere" is a difficult position to establish, when one is trying to establish difference from a position that has successfully claimed hege-

mony for so long, repelling so many previous assaults. To accomplish that challenge, Baudrillard adopted a rhetoric of indirection that intends to confound. Accordingly, it may be useful to pair Baudrillard with another theorist whose take on rationalism is more direct. For Peter Sloterdijk, the challenge has always been with us, as long as philosophy has made rationalistic claims:

> For the philosopher, the human being who exemplifies the love of truth and *conscious* living, life and doctrine must be in harmony. The core of every doctrine is what its followers embody of it. This can be misunderstood in an idealistic way as if it were philosophy's innermost aim to get people to chase after unattainable ideals. But if philosophers are called on to live what they say, their task in a critical sense is much more: to say what they live.

Diogenes—whose appearance on the scene "marks the most dramatic moment in the process of truth" in early Western philosophy—confronts the impossibility of Plato's rationalism. The significance of cheekiness, which Sloterdijk portrays as very broad, arises from this confrontation:

> Since philosophy can only hypocritically live out what it says, it takes cheek to say what is lived. In a culture in which hardened idealisms make lies into a form of living, the process of truth depends on whether people can be found who are aggressive and free ("shameless") enough to speak the truth. Those who rule lose their real self-confidence to the fools, clowns, and kynics.[6]

The Ironic, the Abyss

With both Baudrillard and Sloterdijk in place on the tricky topic of rationalism in politics, we can begin to account for the serious criticisms of this approach. If Baudrillard, Sloterdijk, and others went giddy finally to escape the rationalists, they certainly found critics willing to take them on.[7] What has been less widely discussed is that Baudrillard's style of writing is fully a part of his work. Directing one's theory toward the goal or end of developments is obviously a rhetorical position of long standing in Western social thought; reversing that tradition—or even bringing attention to it—is no simple matter. Baudrillard frequently makes it clear that this posture toward ends is now in play. In *America*, he makes the point repeatedly, as when discussing the automobile: "The point is not to write the sociology or psychology of the car, the point is to drive."[8] As he makes clear elsewhere, there is no doubt that this "drive" is a general issue of approach: "Just as the world drives to a delirious state of things, we must drive (slowly) to a delirious point of view."[9]

In short, Baudrillard is working at the extremes of each phenomenon in an era when, he argues, every event reaches toward extremes. Still, this is more than a matter of hyperactivity; in his remarkable discussion of the California desert, Baudrillard makes the point that the late modern era epitomized by America has an identifiable attitude toward its goals: "[The desert] is a hyperreality because *it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved.* Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams too."[10] As a recent discussion suggests, Baudrillard has adopted this position toward extremity—writing as if the horizon is a whirl of disconnected signs and assumptions, not a rational expectation nor a condition created by our practices of resistance:

> I don't feel—when I am writing—I don't feel it as a political act. I feel it maybe as a symbolic act. Maybe it is a fatal strategy itself—a theoretical fatal strategy—and maybe it has some symbolic effects, to accelerate. Not to resist, I'm not trying to resist, surely. But, I don't know, maybe somewhere I have some, not hope, but some opening to the void. Maybe there will appear, out of the absence of representations, some new events, even more fascinating than past events. But we cannot create them out of our own will or representations. That is sure. Then, anyway, it will be a suspension of the probability of events. There already have appeared some new events. Terrorism is a new event [, as are] AIDS, viruses, or Wall Street crash. These are new "objectile" events. Our time is very poor—at least in France—as to subjective political traditional themes. But our time is rich—over-rich—in metonymic events.[11]

Clearly, this posture toward extremity informs Baudrillard's statements on the politics of the nuclear age. The accumulation of events in 1989 and 1990 followed a path Baudrillard surely understood; Gorbachev exemplified an "openness to the void," and the onrush of events was the major player, as the geopolitical shape of Eastern Europe altered. In terms of predictive quality, Baudrillard's precedent may have been unlikely, but it surely outstripped the more sober visions of, say, international relations scholars, journalists, and historians in the West.

Baudrillard's work continually reenacts a poststructuralist movement beyond constraining structures and depth. The crisis of representation surely deprives events of (economic, psychoanalytical, or religious) depth; its confirmation would be found in a reversibility of explanations. Two contradictory explanations might coexist, remaining untested by depth analyses that had lost their authority. A kind of lightness attains, this time a lightness of meaning.

This idea of reversibility—the tendency of postmodern events to elude some essential meaning in a dizzying, unconstrained sequence of change—is

more than lit crit jargon. As Arthur Kroker has noted, there is even a history of reversibility waiting at the core of liberal institutions. U.S. political life has always had an unexpected reversibility at the center of its notion of power, long before Foucault wrote of doubles and Derrida slipped away from the scene of essentialist politics.[12] The American founders took thorough precautions to insure that one set of governors could be replaced by another. The Enlightenment's early prediction of public opinion—expressed through the crude and slow mechanism of the vote—would be the vehicle for that almost unprecedented reversing of power.

But when vehicles or solutions "go bad," wild consequences occur. Reversibility spins as far out of control as invisibility did in those old "invisible man" movies. Just so. The man is invisible; no version of the citizen is reliable enough to cover the diversity of phenomena required in the wake of Walter Lippmann's apology for that citizenry's demise. John Dewey's sincere response to that apology is a submission to a sucker's game; it cannot be won, just as the invisible man can't make it back to the world of the visible, where it once seemed easy to be. What is left after invisibility and suckers' games is public opinion, an aggregate and a trick, but—as Baudrillard shows—a sham, too. But the absence of a reliable public hardly deters reversibility at all, and that is the core insight of postmodernism in political analysis.

Indeed, the disappearance of "the public" augments reversibility, driving it to speedier reversions and more imaginative results. Change accelerates, as Chinese, Russians, Filipinos, Iraqis, Kuwaitis, and even Panamanians now know. The rootlessness of that change only makes it move faster, featuring developments whose great drama derives, in part, from the fact that they cannot be easily explained. If Americans do not yet know about that pace, it is only because they have yet to imagine what the others have begun to fathom; there will be an American Gorbachev, even if her visible birthmark will be placed differently.

If there is a problem with Baudrillard's "fatal strategy," then, it is not simply that he is lax with the details other writers take more seriously. There are good rhetorical reasons to pursue the sort of "wild social theory" Baudrillard has designed. But in the case of politics, it seems to me that Baudrillard misses something in his general statements. Baudrillard's repeated diagnosis of the "end of politics" requires further exploration. Surely his earliest works suggest that he is deploying his analysis against certain forms of Marxist class struggle. His extraordinary interpretation of Nixon's "silent majority" broadened his notion of the political to include the mechanisms of public opinion, and by implication the interest-group pluralism taken so seriously in American politics. As Baudrillard moved to consider contemporary politics—including, in *America*, the phenomenon of Reagan—his scope grew to include electoral politics. Be-

yond Marxism and liberalism, Baudrillard's treatment of politics becomes more difficult to trace. Opposed to theory, he never defines what this "politics" is that is disappearing.

Surely some old (modernist) versions of the political are indeed gone, for reasons Baudrillard describes persuasively. But the attitude toward knowledge and action that Baudrillard expresses is not entirely alien to politics; the political actor knows about objective irony, about the negotiability of the real, about the force of speed and visibility in contemporary society. This is what Foucault meant when he said he was an empiricist, a claim Baudrillard has echoed. The political forms that would enable these features while avoiding the problems now associated with representation are not at all obvious; my discussions of the freeze, for example, had to be abstracted and bracketed. But the stance toward the world Baudrillard takes does not abolish politics as broadly as he sometimes says it does.

The most important vanishing political element may well be the citizen-as-authority, as "author" who writes its interests and demands onto representative structures. To announce such a disappearance is surely to take a position that is anathema to liberal democratic theory, in which figuring out power is integrally a part of figuring out what to do about it, and then actively creating overt, reasoned responses that can be justified, announced, and formulated in terms of interest. But even this position, in itself, does not account for the general disappearance of the political. As the aesthetic turn in political and social commentary has demonstrated, there are other political moves than the impulse to write demands onto representative institutions. The illiberal or aesthetic choice has long been understood, within dominant forms of social thought, as dangerous and cantankerous.[13] This may be why postmodernism has been read as a flight from politics: perhaps better that than the dangerous politics it actually unleashes.

Politics and Open Secrets

Perhaps the most obvious political consequence of depthlessness, reversibility, and acceleration is that events can indeed operate on the surface Baudrillard so often invokes. The surface is of interest to him for its openness; transformative structures don't intrude, visibility is unimpeded but unrevealing, and a particular disconnection is the prevailing mood. The surface—an antimetaphor, in Baudrillard's usage—becomes a basis for social and political analysis, often reversing commonplace criticisms. For example, in California, "culture itself is a desert . . . and culture has to be a desert so that everything can be equal and shine out in the same supernatural form."[14]

The "open secret" is not Baudrillard's term, but I think it captures the political status of this surface. In American political usage, to call something an "open secret" is to remind one's audience that this is something they already know, a significance they have already grasped, even though they have failed to act. Rhetorically, the open secret has served as a call to responsibility and action; no further information or argument is necessary. The open secret can also be evidence of a concealment (however failed); there must be some reason it can still be called a "secret," even though its secrecy has been lost or discarded. This reason could be a reference to depth; perhaps something remains an open secret because we cannot bear to deal with it, given certain elements of depth psychology. Alternatively, the secret could be a mark of corruption; the open secret is a reminder of unsavory choices made. In any case, this is the operative mood or attitude by which the real world of politics fulfills the role Baudrillard writes for it.

This dual character—both surface and depth—makes the open secret an exemplar of postmodern reversibility. Politically, the open secret would work just fine for antinukers such as Helen Caldicott, or even Robert Jay Lifton; theirs are theories of the truth we weak humans hesitate to face. But, just when guilt and paralysis seem to have taken over, events reverse. The open secret also recalls the simple, open facts of public life (a simplicity economists, for example, have had to strive ever harder to obscure). "Everybody knows," to paraphrase a recent Leonard Cohen song, the absurdities of public issues and political life; this is where all those call-in talk show comments about "common sense" come from, as much as from vestiges of Louis Hartz's civic liberalism. "You don't have to be a genius" to understand and solve this or that problem, Americans say—"this isn't rocket science." Surely, they are objecting to a politics they don't seem to be able to penetrate, but just as surely they have noticed how open the secret is; politics has become simpler, even as it has also become more dangerous and oddly harder to *do*.

The political mood I have just been sketching amounts to the background for the "dumb" character of politics Baudrillard has noticed; deep intelligence is not required to notice the workings of power, and motivation to *do* politics has little to do with information, its absence or complexity. The appropriate political response might not wish to "match wits" with a dominant discourse that wins all arguments (even the ones it seems to lose, but nonetheless are easily incorporated). As Baudrillard counsels us, the appropriate response to modern power may be to go inert, as much of the public evidently already has decided. A deconstructive strategy might not have to be as witty as our political science professors and expert commentators have made it seem. Perhaps the open secret serves as the sign that Americans have matured, outgrown the naive ide-

alism that drove the 1950s. But this sign, too, turns metonymic; we can now understand that this was not a maturation at all, but a way to live with the bomb. The open secret is that the bomb is impossible to live with, and that the calculations about how to escape (for example, Willis's entrepreneurial attitude, discussed in an earlier chapter) are not helpful.

A politics of representation would be expected to have great difficulty with an era which turns "citizen" into object—calculator, entrepreneur, raw material for catastrophe—with such apparent ease as is now the case. (Conversely, the notion of citizen-as-political-author surely set up a situation in which the moves of power against the subject had an easier task.) Democratic theory has always assumed one direction of movement; the other direction—from power to attitudes—is equally plausible, as Edelman explained long before Foucault became important to American political thought: "It is therefore political actions that chiefly shape men's political wants and 'knowledge,' not the other way around. The common assumption that what democratic government does is somehow always a response to the moral codes, desires, and knowledge embedded inside people is as inverted as it is reassuring."[15] Every postmodern political impulse starts from some objection to this new direction of power, from a rejection of the reassurance Edelman cites. And after that change, all sorts of political action become possible.[16]

If Baudrillard has erred—failing to notice how close the actual workings of politics are to his discussion of the end of the political—we might ask how that error came about. And it might be appropriate to ask this most evocative and emotional of contemporary authors about the mood, the attitude under which his analysis proceeds. Baudrillard is, it turns out, all attitude—astral America, inert "majorities," cool memories. This is his version of an aesthetic political move. Politics with attitude.

In other words, this could be an issue of mood and attitude, of posture toward politics, rather than an issue of politics itself. Strategies are at issue here, to be sure; perhaps the issue is how we are to understand their "fatality."[17] The demise of depth analysis, representational mechanisms, truth-telling, and so on, could, after all, engender several possible attitudes: Baudrillard's melancholy, to be sure, but also irreverence, discontent, among others.[18] As Baudrillard understands, there is no theoretical basis from which to criticize his melancholic stance, but the same also goes for the alternatives. Each possibility stages reversals; Baudrillard has, after all, also deconstructed most of what caused the modernist artist to adopt a (seemingly) similar melancholy. As I have already suggested, the overall mood—encompassing either melancholy or giddiness—is irony.

We could focus on that attitude, rather than on the various political actions rendered inoperative by the attitude. In this age of communicated

images, it is no longer necessarily the case that only the design of institutions and the choreography of official politics can influence citizens and constrain or create responses. Attitude, communicated instantly over our many networks, can now serve as a microcosm of response, a kind of governing mood. I have already been discussing the ironic as one such moment. Another possibility is suggested by Peter Sloterdijk's analysis of the cynical.

Sloterdijk's Cynicism

Baudrillard's disposition toward reality—"the real"—is explicitly a cynical stance, one that disbelieves or deconstructs nearly every social commitment that has marked the age of modernity. While Baudrillard's work continues to explore that cynical mood, there is another place we might look for confirmation of that mood's status.[19]

Sloterdijk defines cynicism several times in the course of his long, often not-entirely-serious book. His "first definition" serves to introduce the mood: "Cynicism is enlightened false consciousness. It 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."[20] Sloterdijk's central expression of cynicism connects it to the kynicism of the ancient Greeks, especially Diogenes. "Ancient kynicism, at least in its Greek origins, is in principle cheeky." This cheekiness is explicitly a response to impossible philosophical dicta, as I have discussed earlier in this chapter.

What Sloterdijk adds to Baudrillard's cynical stance—in addition to the aggressiveness and shamelessness of his project to counter melancholy with cynicism—is the (anti)history of a split in the cynical mood. Sloterdijk's definitions usually pull two ways; while cheekiness characterizes the best response to power in this cynical age, the exercise of power is also cynical, untouched by attempts to constrain it in traditional ways. Both power's operations and the culture toward which it is directed display cynicism; a cynical response finds new ways to refuse the manipulations of cynical power. (This double cynicism—aspiring to a very broad description of the age—is what gives life to the title's play on Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, playfully recalling his similarly broad ontology.)

The cynicism displayed by modern power is steadfastly skeptical about representative mechanisms, long since having abandoned the standards of "truth-telling" we would like to impose on institutions and other, less palpable structures. The cynicism of modern power gives Sloterdijk's book much of its rhetorical force; we recognize immediately that this

cynicism—even more than the interests it serves—is what marks the operations of power in our age. There is a shock of recognition, reading Sloterdijk's evocation of the mood of modern power, which he calls "master cynicism."

> Modern cynicism . . . is the masters' antithesis to their own idealism as ideology and as masquerade. The cynical master lifts the mask, smiles at his weak adversary, and suppresses him. *C'est la vie. Noblesse oblige.* Order must prevail. . . . In its cynicisms hegemonic power airs its secrets a little, indulges in semi-self-enlightenment, and tells all. *Master cynicism is a cheekiness that has changed sides.*[21]

Sloterdijk understands the efficacy of master cynicism's response, in league with the potent, if false, remnants of the Enlightenment ("the idea that it would be reasonable to be happy" in "our gloomy modernity"). It is this possibility—that false consciousness in the service of power might prevail after all—that sets the stakes of the nuclear age, in Sloterdijk's view. "Atomically armed civilizations . . . are going through a crisis of their innermost vitality that is probably without historical parallel." In this period of "chronic crisis," it is demanded of all humans—not only the politicos who are accustomed to the ambiguity of important matters—that we "accept permanent uncertainty as the unchangeable background of its striving for happiness."[22]

Sloterdijk thus provides the best description to date of life with the bomb; life under security provided by this permanent uncertainty will be life against itself—life against liveliness. His use of Diogenes as the embodiment of cheekiness reminds us that this is not a new development, but the book's thorough discussion of twentieth-century European politics underscores the distinctiveness of this age. As I have discussed in earlier chapters, the bomb functions against longstanding human archetypes (such as the heroic warrior), and displaces any other metaphysics, becoming our "last, most energetic enlightener."[23] In short, Sloterdijk displaces all prevailing, serious, and straightforward totalities with fake ones—kynical ones, informed by enlightened false consciousness, at war with the cynical totalities that oppress and destroy.

The great strength of Sloterdijk's argument is how easily it finds a place for nearly every contemporary political event within its framework, its universe of cynicism and cheekiness. The tiresome topic of "politician's lies" is rejuvenated as master cynicism: a way of life, rather than an exception or transgression of an otherwise acceptable and functioning, enlightened order. Likewise, the solemnity of the critic—whether the liberal or the critical theorist—is put to a test when we suggest that the very problem may be the impossibility of what they have been insisting power do. "Communicative competence" disappears as a signal concern when

we understand that power is already stunningly competent at cynical manipulation. Baudrillard's longstanding quarrel with the validity of "the realm of the real" finds an important new ally; the spokesmen for the real have long since adopted a cynical mode, and their opponents can trace their cheeky replies back to the same ancient source the rationalists claim.

Perhaps most important, Sloterdijk's analysis helps us clarify the postmodern political impulse. There is a tension in Baudrillard's work, between the declaration of the end of politics, on one hand, and the close parallels between his work and the political impulse I outlined earlier in this chapter. As it turns out, Baudrillard's analysis is not deployed against politics per se, but against all claims to reality and truth. This is the context for Sylvere Lotringer's remarkable response: "Jean, your theory is too true to be good!"[24] The demise of Enlightenment-era politics is such a dramatic event that "good" and "truth" are radically inverted, and we might as well speak of these inversions as an end of politics. Within Sloterdijk's project, Baudrillard's philosophical assault on politics is confirmed, and attains its (paradoxically) appropriate, political position. The best response to the nuclear age and the triumphant era of master cynicism would be an ongoing *political* enterprise—cheeky, savvy about the crisis of representation, and committed to political projects just at the moment they apparently become futile.

Sloterdijk asserts the efficacy of kynical politics, and that part of his argument is not as persuasive as his diagnosis. The cheeky response takes apart liberal modes of opposition; it may or may not also take apart power. That is for political action to decide, and there are good reasons to suspect—as Sloterdijk admits—that it may already be far too late. But this possibly excessive confidence in the efficacy of the kynical response would be a minor error, when juxtaposed to Sloterdijk's stunning diagnosis of our age. The cynical mood provides confirmation of the postmodern condition, in a way more fully matching the dimensions of the condition, in a way that Lyotard's more direct (if less political) statements cannot match. And there are reasons, as well, to think that the events of 1989 and 1990 have now—just at the point of the disappearance of politics—finally captured the ground for what now becomes politics itself, creating the grounds for the response Sloterdijk could evoke only through historical analysis and hysterical example.

1989

Nobody doubts that extraordinary events happened in 1989. On nearly every continent, situations that had seemed permanently stuck in a miasma of totalitarian control simply began to unravel. While this could not be mistaken for a simple outbreak of "the good," nobody seemed entirely

sure what had happened. Most intellectual analyses emphasized the details; there were new actors and new institutions to know.

Although it is too early, at this writing in mid-1990, to declare very much, I would still venture a tentative position. We have entered some early stage of the culmination of the nuclear age I have been describing, and its refolding into an age best understood within the position detailed by postmodernists, especially Derrida, Baudrillard, Sloterdijk, and Foucault. The age is marked by a new and unexpected prominence of certain themes and processes. "New rules" emerge (through the mechanisms of a master cynicism that has consolidated its position for decades with only sporadic difficulty). This new, late modern power now, belatedly, meets its opposition, a counter movement of extraordinary, if intermittent and unreliable, efficacy. The features of this encounter between late modern master cynicism and postmodern kynicism should not surprise us; the reversal of foreground and background is not a simple procedure. To understand this era, then, we begin as every generation of intellectuals has begun when faced with inexplicable change; we look to emerging and unexpected developments in the rules that govern the world of events. We need to investigate precisely what rules have changed, how the new rules work, and what the implications of these changes will be.

We can provisionally identify some of these new rules, remembering that several of them are the simple reversal of predominant conceptions of space, time, and event. I would summarize these as: (1) the new role of pace in political communication; (2) the relative deprivileging of territory as defined by geopolitics; (3) the displacement of ideologies by communications and newly potent commodity relations; (4) the displacement of sight by spying; and (5) the kynical and fractal realignment of such oppositional forms as the mass demonstration in response to the crisis of representation and new domains of power. What follows, then, is a microcosm of the emerging world and the opposition that has both promoted that emergence and is now necessary, in this provisional analysis, for further opposition.

Pace and Political Communication

The instant communication of political reports and demands becomes a phenomenon in itself; what had previously been in the background, a technological curiosity, now is well enough developed and integrated to become a phenomenon in its own right. Feeding on itself, this pace soon becomes momentum, as any football announcer knows. Force is transformed from the realm of weight and physical power to the realms of expectation, change, and the adrenaline rush of political action chronicled in American electoral politics by Hunter Thompson.

The nuke was the first important sign of this emergence; the telephone, automobile, and aircraft were subsumed under the (triplet) signs of the nuke, the tube, and the microprocessor. Our Fordist culture has long read these emergences as harbingers of yet new products to come: neutron bombs! flying cars! a mutant television-telephone! hologram video games! celullar FAX machine-mojo wires! bioengineered life forms! No doubt, some of these products (and many others) will emerge; there are, after all, many Fordists among us, and they have huge reserves of energy and power. But the actual "end" of their enterprise is now visible; no matter what the vehicle, the effect is defined by the pace of advancing developments. Successful actors (oppositional or not) will be those who can function at speed. That is the emerging rule; expect a gallop of events, and take seriously that enduring Deaverism—the edict always to "stay ahead of the curve."

Geopolitics Reoriented

Territory suffers as the central goal of politics, even while space emerges as a newly important figure of speech, displacing light and observation. Germany and the Middle East combine to teach lessons; the combination of Germany—never imagined before it happened—became possible because territory at least recedes from its customary role as the most important border of events, the container of last resort and judgment. The pace of travel (of weapons, of goods, of information) renders several sets of seemingly solid borders archaic. This possibility—unimaginable until the reunification of Germany became a fait accompli—soon becomes almost obvious. This is not a universal development—all sorts of borders retain their ability to define and orient political disputes. As the Middle East reminds us, resources are still distributed territorially. But the oil that now serves as the most coveted resource fuels movement, and that motion has already assumed new forms, as information takes over. The remarkable spectacle of American broadcasters in Baghdad, even as Iraq prepared for war and then fought against the United States, marked a border dispute more important than the Iraq-Kuwait tiff itself. Modern communications "covered" the territorial dispute; eventually, we now suspect, the coverage will win.

Knowing that territory and oil will both pass quickly into the realm of the forgotten, we can still go to war over them, knowing full well that this will not "end all wars." This is cynical military action, incapable of resuscitating the warrior; throughout this hugely popular military exercise, enlistments actually went down. The role played by the United States in Panama (during late 1989) and the Persian Gulf, just a year later, may yet turn out to have been a brittle, frenzied attempt to preserve a role for ter-

ritory, after the demise of the Berlin Wall. Or, if the United States insists on playing its hyper-militaristic role anyway, at least the difference between our antagonistic role and Europe's newfound unity will be more difficult to miss.

Ideologies Displaced

A distinctive feature of these transformations is that they elude capture by the existing ideological apparatus. No matter how hard the capitalist West tries to proclaim a victory of its own ideas and institutional arrangements, it becomes clear that the actual victory must be awarded to change itself, to media image, and to the ironies and cynicisms that gather in this new arena. Many of the essays in this book have argued that a basic incoherence—not precisely lies or manipulations or confusions—necessarily informs our political culture. This is not the grounds for ideological victory (or the vindication of critical theory either, for that matter).

As Timothy Luke has recently argued in *Screens of Power: Ideology, Domination, and Resistance in Informational Society*, it is the communication that now alters ideological questions, displacing any critical attempt to impose the reverse. Any Western "tradition" that could be said to have "triumphed" had long since already been transformed into an ironic, floating "teletradition." In one very useful example, the "return to traditional values" in American society is driven by an unconcealed commodification of image, a development that simulates a connection between family values and "telegenically sold products," in a format Baudrillard captured long ago.

> In consumer society, Jesus or God, like Wonder Bread or Geritol, is sold telegenically as a product that heals bodies, mends filth, and changes attitudes. . . . Taking this logic to its ultimate conclusion, Jim and Tammy Bakker even built—before their fall—an amusement theme park called Heritage, U.S.A. . . . which was billed as a "Christian Disneyland," to round out their televangelical consumer product line and prove that fundamentalist faith can be "fun."[25]

The trap, of course, is that a critique of this commodity culture itself becomes commodified. Luke shows how a newly invigorated neoconservative movement has been able opportunistically to marginalize critical intellectuals who misunderstood the new conditions under which they worked. Luke's recommendation for a reconstructive opposition, using "alternative media" outside corporate and bureaucratic control, shows how Foucault's specific intellectual looks to the American scene.

> Critical intellectuals could help revitalize many forms of resistance within the everyday vernacular dimensions of politics, language, society,

> and culture at the local, municipal, or regional level by creating new counterinstitutions. . . . The intellectuals' contributions of critically grounded "good sense" might recombine with the popularly oriented "common sense" of other individuals in their local communities to resist the present administrative regime from within. Fortunately, a permanent resistance to these ideologies and their domination already exists among many diverse audiences, who are puzzled by—and question—many of the images they scan on the screens of power.[26]

Acknowledging that such responses "could all fail," Luke has still established the new, marginal ideological position from which we could yet move. The telecommodity becomes the new arena, not vindicating any ideology so much as forcing a reexamination of intellectual roles that have always underpinned ideologies.

Ways of Seeing/Ways of Spying

Sight and illumination no longer function as they did throughout the modern era, but they do not go away entirely. The spy becomes an important microcosm of the era, emblematic of what power does, emphasizing surveillance and the play of power's seeming absence, on the one hand, and citizen self-control, on the other.

The spy's currency is a particular kind of information, which exists only on the condition that it be acquired cynically. The spy thus exists at the point of intersection between Sloterdijk's cynical age and Foucault's disciplinary one, showing how these two are linked in the postmodern terrain. The reversibility of the spy is her most basic protection; there is always the chance that the spy has already changed sides, and awareness of that fact conditions every encounter with the spy or the information she produces. But despite that reversibility, nobody doubts the spy's (at least sporadic) efficacy; in that sense, the spy establishes both the condition for postmodern politics as well as the authority that politics will have to oppose.

Matching the spy is a tricky enterprise; spy vs. spy is, after all, fully within the spy's game. One more reversal is always possible, at least until the spy opts out of the game and takes public refuge in one capital or another, quickly telling secrets that just as quickly begin to devaluate as the other side adjusts. But the linked instabilities at the center of the spy's project are not necessarily debilitating. This is the genius of surveillance, as Foucault established when he explained how the spy can even make use of absence, by distributing signs of possible presence (as in the Panopticon). It is, as well, a feature of espionage deployed with phenomenal success by Richard Nixon and the various "red hunters" of the 1950s; while the left earnestly complained that various accused spies

were innocent, the conservative "master cynics" took full advantage of their early discovery of the political utility of surveillance.

The left (always enamored of the real too long) finally developed a response, in the almost complete openness of most civil rights and antiwar groups of the 1960s. In radical meetings of that era, activists frequently addressed the spies they assumed were present, somewhere, in their audiences (or on their phone lines, or in their mailbox). But this response was only marginally effective; by then, the spies had found new ways to operate, using their ability to create identities in yet another way. J. Edgar Hoover and the generation who followed him created an identity *for those they watched*. Spying became an element of the production of political enemies. That this iteration of strategy and counterstrategy can continue, as it has, is perhaps the best confirming evidence of a politics-without-essence, establishing the possibility of postmodern responses. In a sense, George Bush announces the era of surveillance as effectively as Reagan had announced the hegemony of the image. With Bush, we have the master spy, out in the open now, playing electoral politics. And still the spy's game perseveres, still somehow almost impossible to expose. The spy rules.

Oppositional Forms

Even if, taken singly, the works of each of the postmodern analysts I have been discussing fail to produce space for opposition, the accumulation of their work now provides just what they resist. Baudrillard seems to have chosen a point just beyond any imaginable politics as his point of departure, and that choice conditions whatever political commentary appears in his works. (His ostentatious grumpiness over feminism, emphatic in *Seduction*, is only the most recent example.)[27] Sloterdijk politicizes knowledge in a way directly translated to political action, but is, so far at least, working well within the historical period of late modernity. Foucault was working on these themes late in his life, but they were left undeveloped.[28]

It seems likely that the next major project of postmodern analysis is to reread the political forms of opposition that have succeeded in recent years. The apparent opening of political space is hardly a rebuttal to Foucault, Baudrillard, and Sloterdijk; indeed, to formulate the question in that fashion is to show how absurd such a conclusion would be. Opposition to new forms of authority, propitious use of the speed and fractal character of change, the sometimes frivolous attitude toward the ends of radical action—all of these were evident in 1989 and 1990, and each confirms the possibility of postmodern oppositional tactics.

At some point, the combined effects of speed, surveillance, and deterritorialization produce an entirely different kind of political change. Bau-

drillard has described this new transformation as fractal, and the name fits. Recalling the new fractal mathematics, this mode of change is depthless but also extensive, incremental but also instantaneous. Transformations now array their effects throughout the "body politic," all at once.

> After the natural stage, the mercantile stage and the structural stage, comes the fractal stage of value. To the first corresponded a natural referent, and value evolved in reference to a natural use of the world. To the second corresponded a general equivalent and value evolved in reference to a logic of merchandise. To the third corresponds a code and value unfurls itself in reference to an ensemble of models. To the fourth stage, which I will call the fractal stage, also the viral stage . . . there is no longer a referent at all. The value radiates in all directions, filling in all interstices, without bearing reference to anything whatsoever except by mere contiguity.
>
> At this fractal stage (which one can relate to the fractals) there is no longer any equivalence, natural or general. Also, there is not any law of value as such, dialectical or structural. There only remains a sort of epidemic of value, a general metastasis of value; a sort of proliferation and problematic dispersal.[29]

The recent return of old ethnic confrontations in the Eastern bloc teach a lesson unnoticed so far; it is the United States that subsumed—fractally transformed—its own ethnic differences (with the obvious and important exception of differences seen as "racial," namely *vis-à-vis* Native Americans and African-Americans). Totalitarian control (based on totality, overt and modernist force) failed; the American model succeeded. As Baudrillard suggests, there is no obvious judgment to be applied to this process (or within it); each explanation or evaluation is reversible, and is, in any case, quickly outdated.

The transformations of 1989 and 1990 fit Baudrillard's new fractal category. Each event was as instantaneous as the famous FAXes transmitted to machines controlled by protesting Chinese students. The political upheavals were both complete and incremental; ideology was given much less attention than spectacle, but governments fell. The exemplar, no doubt, was Czechoslovakia, where even a few days before the demonstrations began nobody anticipated change. In the blink of an eye, a playwright was head of state and an expatriate artist was the chief diplomat in a Washington embassy known for spies and listening devices. Even the "counterexamples" of 1989 and 1990 confirmed the new postmodern condition; George Bush's Panamanian adventure seemed quaint, anchored only to the Drug War spectacle in the United States. Everybody knew that the Tiananmen catastrophe only delayed for a few years the transformation of a remarkably durable Chinese government. And, at least in its early days, the deployment of U.S. forces to Iraq in 1990 drew

attention to the startling reversal of a very predictable Soviet diplomatic stance in the area, more than to any resurrection of the warrior (who was, in any case, wrapped in a plastic gas-suit, absurdly dressed in a desert, practicing for the onset of biological—viral—war).

In Berlin and Beijing, especially, the televised display of the kynical attitude became the central political act. Nobody much questioned, anymore, the new preeminence of the street demonstration. Advice to "slow down" had been a mainstay of the counterrevolution in the United States during its own outbreak of demonstrative politics a quarter century earlier, but was seldom heard in these instances—the pace of the events was the point. Ideology receded; "the people" were a street event, not a construct of representative interest and will. No longer a representation of "the people," the demonstration had not been robbed of its efficacy, and in fact worked better than ever, pushing the pace of events to giddier levels yet. The demonstration is only the arena, the microcosm that accompanies the transformation. It is the metaphorical street that was captured, not the physical one (where one would, say, prevent the delivery of parts to an auto plant on strike). Here, the street was at issue because the show wouldn't fit in a proper television studio.

On the other hand, couldn't this be simply an excessively dreamy fable of deconstruction? No doubt, but in the wake of a year of extraordinary political activity—in the wake of a nuclearism everyone accepted as the end of such politics—events proceeded that demand fables, as well as detailed coverage of specific elements. Gorbachev and Reagan had finally issued forth an unmistakably postmodern era, a triumph of deconstructive strategies. What else could the removal of the Berlin Wall mean?

Less than two years after Tiananmen, of course, it appears likely that each of these transformations had inexplicably paused, or even reversed direction again. The U.S.S.R.'s unmanageability overwhelms whatever might happen in Eastern Europe. The U.S. military role has been reestablished, while contention pervades South Africa and the Chinese regime is evidently in firm control. A fractal counterrevolution, it would seem, could be just as complete and sudden as its revolutionary referent.

For the theorist, if not for the subjects of oppressive regimes, this outcome may be preferable. We have no generalized "new day" here; we have, instead, a broad change in how political change happens.