Weimar Sexual Cynicism

_We cannot fail to be struck by the similarity between the process of civilization and the libidinal development of the individual._
— Sigmund Freud, _Civilization and its Discontents_1

Cynicism, Peter Sloterdijk has suggested, is one of the fundamental categories of modern existence. But what is cynicism? Sloterdijk defines cynicism as “enlightened false consciousness,” an intentionally paradoxical term which requires explanation.2 Sloterdijk’s definition has two fundamental constituent parts, “enlightenment” and “false consciousness.” Historically, “false consciousness” is a Marxist term and refers specifically to the proletariat’s failure to recognize its own best interests. When workers themselves support an oppressive capitalist government that exploits them, that is false consciousness. The best example is, of course, workers’ support for the Nazi Party during the tempestuous final years of the first German republic. In the classic Marxist sense, developed most fully by the young Georg Lukács of _History and Class Consciousness_ and the Antonio Gramsci of the _Prison Notebooks_, the bourgeoisie exercises ideological hegemony over the proletariat.3 It seeks to prevent the working class from understanding and seeing through its real situation in society. In the _Communist Manifesto_, Karl Marx had famously declared that as a result of capitalist economic upheaval, “man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind.”4 The rulers, of course, want to avoid such sobriety. When, over the course of various failed revolutions, it became clear that in fact a majority of workers did not

2 Peter Sloterdijk, _Kritik der zynischen Vernunft_ (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), v. 1, 37. English translation as _Critique of Cynical Reason_ by Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). I have used my own translations from the German.
blind man can see that. But I serve the false system with everything I’ve got.’ This is enlightened false consciousness. Malmy knows that what he is doing is absurd and harmful, but he does it anyway. Strictly speaking, “enlightened false consciousness” is not defined by lack of knowledge but rather by lack of action. Cynicism is theory without practice. The cynical person is the smart person who fails to act on his or her smartness. Cynicism is enlightenment minus courage and morality. The cynic believes nothing can be done about an already bad situation and looks out for number one.

Sloterdijk defines sexual cynicism as one of the major forms that cynicism can take in the modern world. In suggesting this, Sloterdijk is following his Frankfurt School masters Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, who had devoted an entire chapter of the Dialektik der Aufklärung to the decay of morality, especially sexual morality.6 The basic problem that Horkheimer and Adorno had identified in their famous study was once again the problem of tackling traditional morality. If the Enlightenment got rid of God, the church, moral dogma, and all the various ideologies that used to keep people in their place, what, then, would keep people in their place? What would keep people from lying, cheating, stealing, even murdering, if they wished to do so? Enlightenment wanted to “free” people from religion. “But this liberation went further than its humane proponents had intended,” suggested Horkheimer and Adorno. It resulted in what they called the “organized anarchy” of advanced capitalism that is the teleology of modern capitalist society: the doomed city of Mahagonny, in which the same freedom in which “there’s nothing we may not do and where “Don’ts are not permitted” also enslaves one and ultimately destroys one.8

An attempt at schematization is in order. Enlightenment is supposed to follow a specific pattern: A) There is an inhumane ideology, for instance the Christian religion, which helps to dominate and oppress people. B) That inhumane ideology is exposed and eliminated, for instance by burning churches or executing priests, or simply by ignoring its precepts in such a way that, as Nietzsche had suggested, God “dies.” C) In the place of the old, inhumane ideology, comes a new, humane, enlightened morality in which people recognize their own best interests and are kind and good not because God or the Pope or the King tells them to be so but because they see that being kind and good is the rational, the right thing to do. Cynicism follows steps A and B, but not step C. It eliminates the old ideology, but it puts nothing in its place. It paves the way not for enlightened humanity but for nihilism and violence.

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5 Erich Kästner, Fabian: Die Geschichte eines Moralisten (Munich: Deutsch-Taschenbuch Verlag, 1992), 32; cited in Sloterdijk, v. 2, 842.
6 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Dialektik der Aufklärung (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984); English translation by John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1991). I have used my own translations from the German.
7 Horkheimer and Adorno, 109.
In sexual cynicism, the old, inhuman ideology which had helped to dominate and oppress people in step A was the ideology of love. This ideology idealized the beloved woman, but by putting her on a pedestal it also rendered her powerless. Historically, the ideology of love progressed through various stages of acceptance and disillusionment. With reference to the worship of the beloved person in the ideology of love, Horkheimer and Adorno write that the excessive nature of romantic idealism made cynicism inevitable, guaranteeing a dialectic of illusion and disillusionment, madonna and whore:

When feelings are raised to the level of ideology, the scorn with which they are treated in the real world is not eliminated. Compared to the starry heavens into which ideology transports them, real feelings always seem too vulgar. This discrepancy only contributes to the banishment of feeling. The elimination of feelings was already implicit in the formalization of reason.9

Horkheimer and Adorno are careful to underscore the fundamental nature of sexual cynicism. If, as Freud had suggested in *Civilization and its Discontents*, Eros was the primary force for the creation of society, the force that bonded people together, then it was not just another ideology.10 Rather, it was the fundamental force at work in all societies. Nevertheless, Freud had insisted that while love was the necessary prime force in social organization, it was by no means sufficient. While society needed Eros to bring people into communities, it also needed a countervailing force for the society itself to be productive, since Eros, unhindered, would lead people simply to sleep and make love and stare longingly into each other's eyes all day long. There had to be a force to counteract Eros. Hence Freud had already sketched out a place for sexual cynicism, not just in the Central Europe of the 1920s, but in all periods and places of human history. Horkheimer and Adorno followed Freud's lead. They saw that the all-too romantic Odysseus had to leave Calypso and Circe behind in order to become a productive bourgeois individual. Enlightened man — and Horkheimer and Adorno really did mean man, not woman here — puts shackles on his feelings, ties himself to the mast in the name of progress.

At the height of the feudal era in the Middle Ages, the ideology of love is expressed in the love songs of the troubadours and the Minnesingers; Cervantes' *Don Quixote* represents the first, gentle attack on that ideology by one of its representatives, while the novels of the Marquis de Sade express the final mocking of the ideology at the hands of the aristocracy itself. At its height, the aristocracy, like Don Quixote, upholds the sacredness and uniqueness of love; at the moment of its decline, it succumbs to a decadence and cynicism that make Dulcinea look like the pure virgin Quixote had mistaken her for. Likewise for the bourgeoisie. It begins its ascent to class power by attacking the sexual decadence of the aristocracy — in plays like Lessing's *Emilia Galotti* and novels like Richardson's *Pamela* — and upholding an ideal of marriage based on pure, true love. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, in the art and poetry of the Central European *Jugendstil*, the ideology of romantic love experienced a powerful renaissance expressed memorably, for instance, in Rudolf G. Binding's poem "Love," or in paintings like "The Kiss" by Gustav Klimt. And in the utopian visions of expressionism, the concept of love becomes a universal ideal. But by the end of the First World War, and with the decline of expressionist utopianism, the most advanced bourgeois thinkers, like the declining aristocracy before them, rejected the ideology of love as hypocritical nonsense. Horkheimer and Adorno explain this rejection as partly the result of economic changes which marginalized the family, formerly the center of social and economic structure.11 The ideology of love had served to support and guarantee the dominance of the bourgeois family. By the beginning of the Weimar Republic, however, "the family is dying out," as one woman in Erich Kästner's novel *Fabian* suggests.12 Since the bourgeois family no longer played a crucial role in the economic structure, the ideology of love was no longer necessary. In other words, Weimar sexual cynicism was closely connected to the disintegration of the family as not just a social but also an economic unit:

Under the aegis of heavy industry, love was eliminated. The decay of the small property owners, the decline of the free economic subject affects the family: it is no longer the previously famed kernel of society, because it no longer forms the basis of bourgeois economic existence. Children no longer grow up with the family as their life horizon, the independence of the father disappears and with it resistance to his authority. Previously subordination in the family home sparked in girls the passion which seemed to lead them into freedom, even if they found freedom neither in marriage nor anywhere else. Once girls have a chance at a job, they are barred from love. The more generalized becomes modern industry's demand that everyone bow down to it completely, the more everyone ... becomes a little expert, an existence forced to look out only for number one.13

Horkheimer and Adorno add that the disintegration of the family unit and the spread of sexual cynicism result also in a war between the sexes. Sexual cynicism is frequently expressed as a debunking not only of love, but also of women, with whom the ideology of love had been associated. The woman who is no longer rendered powerless on a pedestal as an object of adoration is now rendered powerless as a sex object. The liberation from the ideology of love reveals itself as enslavement to an ideology of sex. If Horkheimer and Adorno are correct in their analysis of modern sexual morality, then we can expect the cultural production of the Weimar Republic, as the first truly "modern" period in

9 Horkheimer and Adorno, 111.
10 "Eros and Ananke [Love and Necessity] have become the parents of civilization." Freud, 55.
11 On the history of the family, see Helmut Begemann, *Strukturwandel der Familie* (Witten: Luther, 1966).
12 Kästner, 88.
13 Horkheimer and Adorno, 127.
German history, to reflect a) the disintegration of the family unit; b) the increasing isolation of the individual economic subject, whether male or female; and c) a sexual cynicism intimately connected with the first two developments and resulting d) in an ideology of hatred toward women. If Klaus Theweleit’s exhaustive studies have shown nothing else, they have shown that hatred toward women was widespread in the culture of the Weimar Republic.

The best example of this kind of modernist, enlightened hatred of women is the Italian futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who had already declared war on women before the outbreak of the First World War. Marinetti explained his “scorn for women” in a tract entitled, tellingly enough, “Against Amore and Parliamentarianism.” Marinetti equated love and parliamentary democracy as similarly effeminate silliness. In this tract, Marinetti associated women with the entire romantic culture of the nineteenth century bourgeoisie, asserting that amore — love — was nothing but the invention of poets. “We are convinced that Amore — sentimentality and lechery — is the least natural thing in the world. There is nothing natural and important except coitus, whose purpose is the futuria of the species.”14 Significantly, the rejection of all forms of romantic ideology went along with the rejection of women themselves, since for male avant-gardists the ideology of love was specifically female and effeminate:15

We scorn woman conceived as the sole ideal, the divine reservoir of Amore, the woman-poison, woman the magic trinket, the fragile woman, obsessing and fatal, whose voice, heavy with destiny, and whose dreamed tresses reach out and mingle with the foliage of forests drenched in moonshine.16

Marinetti presents himself as the opponent of a powerful and oppressive ideology. He refuses to endow the procreative act with a romantic, obfuscatory ideology, and he insists on seeing it as merely useful and necessary, not as the ultimate goal of or even a prime signifier in human life: “The carnal life,” he declares, “will be reduced to the conservation of the species, and that will be so much gain for the growing stature of man.”17 For Marinetti, writing shortly after the end of the First World War, “Sentiment is the typical virtue of vegetables,” and “family feeling is an inferior sentiment.”18

Marinetti’s Italian futurist sentiments are echoed by German avant-gardists as well, and powerfully reinforced by the experience of the First World War, in which the estrangement between front line troops and the “home front” is expressed to a large extent as an estrangement between male soldiers and female civilians, or, more specifically, between male sons, husbands, and boyfriends, and the mothers, wives, and girlfriends whom they blame a) for having suffocated them before the war began; b) for having allowed them to escape such suffocation by going off to the war; c) for not having supported them or understood them sufficiently in their new role as soldiers; d) for having betrayed them emotionally or sexually; e) for not fighting in the war themselves; f) for having contributed to the war’s loss; and g) for contributing to the feminization of German society. In German veterans’ eyes, women just could not win. German theorists like Hans Bliüher, whose book The Role of Eroticism in Male Society was a classic young movement treatise, suggested that women, while necessary for the preservation of the species, were not the true bearers of human culture. Bliüher distinguished between culturally and intellectually seminal “male society,” and “female society,” seminal only biologically but barren in all other respects.19 The bureaucratic organization and regimentation of sexuality during the First World War, intentionally carried out by the German High Command in order to maximize fighting efficiency and minimize the risk of sexually-transmitted diseases, made romantic love one of the casualties.20 One of the chief fruits of the High Command’s labors were brothels organized and run by the military, with separate brothels for officers and enlisted men. In these brothels everything had its fixed price. The military ran these brothels in a completely unromantic, objective, no-nonsense way. Just as it sought to provide soldiers with food and clothing, so too it sought to provide them with sex. Literary memoirs of the war testify amply to the bureaucratization and mechanization of sex in wartime. This mechanization, together with the killing or wounding of over seven million men at the front, the entry of women into the job market, mass unemployment, and the growth of mass culture after the war was over went a long way toward further deconstructing any romantic ideology. As Bertolt Brecht remarked, “the realm of eroticism is exhausted in bourgeois society. Literature gives evidence of this exhaustion by showing us that sex no longer has any associations” to higher ideals.21 One male character from a left-wing war novel, Four Infantrymen, by Ernst Johannsen, echoes Marinetti’s words in the German context. The chief character in this novel is an educated soldier, a university student who, though he has a girlfriend at home, has learned at the front what he could never have learned at the university, and what his girlfriend, naïve thing, will never be

16 Marinetti, 72.
17 Marinetti, 73.
18 Marinetti, 76-7.
19 Hans Bliüher, Die Rolle der Erotik in der männlichen Gesellschaft (Stuttgart: Klett, 1962). Bliüher’s work stood in a long tradition that included Otto Weininger’s important Geschlecht und Charakter and reached through Freud, who declared that “women soon come into opposition to civilization and display their retarding and restraining influence,” and that “the work of civilization has become increasingly the business of men” (Freud, 59), through Camille Paglia, who pronounced in Sexual Personae that art, culture, and science are created by men as “the most effective weapon against the flux of [female] nature.” Camille Paglia, Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 28.
able to understand as she wrings her hands and waits for him at home. Johannsen’s enlightened, disillusioned, pre-existentialist hero has come to reject the ideology of love. Sitting with his comrades at the front, he reflects with them on the hypocrisy of love, women, and society back home. Here is a list of what our hero hates:

The modern — and not only the modern — hypocrisy and mendacity with respect to sex. It’s fascinating — the lying, the euphemisms, and the naivete in our belles lettres. Coitus is always the effect, love is always the cause. The pretense that without love there is no need for coitus, that love is the only thing that awakens sexuality, that love can be found as frequently as human beings can be found, with the result that the entire world finds itself consciously and unconsciously duty-bound to act out the comedy of true love, which is practically a unique case. Our belles lettres are primarily responsible for the overvaluation of love and women. They tend to present men as donkeys, they are constantly chewing the cud of love and coming to an end with wedding bells...

Horkheimer and Adorno write that “the unavoidable consequence already implicit in the Cartesian division of human beings into mental and physical substance is ... the destruction of romantic love. Romantic love is seen as a mere cover-up, a rationalization of bodily impulses.” Their judgment is an accurate description of the attitude projected in this war novel and in much of the disillusioned, sober literature of the Weimar Republic. What is noteworthy in the student’s attitude is not just his rejection of love, but also his intentionally disillusioned, enlightening pose. The student purports here to be breaking a romantic ideological taboo, to be pushing the envelope of allowed speech. He and his comrades are in agreement that the wordly purple prose of romantic literature values women entirely too highly with respect to men. The student’s comrade Job avows,

Yes ... it’s amazing what the poets and writers come up with. The philosopher is right, in their novels and stories the writers have their men behave like idiots in front of women, so that any goose who reads this trash will believe she’s worth a king’s ransom.

This is a male enlightenment community breaking female romantic taboos. It is a kind of sexual enlightenment self-help group working through the crimes committed by romantic ladies to what, in 1990s pop psychology, would be called their “inner man,” their “Iron John.” This is sex education from hell. Johannsen’s student soldier adds that sex should not be apotheosized into something extraordinary, since it is nothing but a physiological phenomenon: “Lots of donkeys act as if they were in paradise when their angel gracefully deigns to take the horizontal position.” Sex here is mechanized and has become a function. It has nothing to do with love or with any of the other romantic bourgeois myths created around it over the course of several centuries. The act here is described in purely physical, geometrical terms: “the horizontal position.” Anyone who thinks that love is something beyond this is a “donkey.” Horkheimer and Adorno write that modern sexual cynicism is characterized by the decoupling of sex from love, mechanical motion from human affection. This decoupling is viewed as progress. “The dissociation [between love and sex], which mechanizes lust and transforms romantic longing into a con game, is a lethal attack on love itself.”

The Neue Sachlichkeit of the Weimar Republic was seen by its proponents as a return to what Warren G. Harding, in the United States, called “normalcy” after the revolutionary, romantic, erotic, idealistic, and utopian hopes and longings of the war and the immediate postwar period. All utopian and idealistic longing was viewed as immature and childish, and the truly realistic course was the renunciation of idealism and the acceptance of the unremarkable, boring, ordinary, quotidian existence of life in an expanding, rationalizing capitalist society. This was supposed to be the end of ideology. One was disillusioned, cynical, unemotional. One had had enough of grand projects to change the world. As one of the central constituents of utopian thinking and a foundation of pre-war ideology, love had to go.

Sexual cynicism in Weimar is intimately connected to other cynicisms, particularly political cynicism. As Freud suggested, the family and society are mirror images of each other. Ontogeny repeats phylogeny. The woman of questionable character to whom one comes back after the war is also Germany herself. She has betrayed one, left one out in the cold, stabbed one in the back, and is, in fact, when it comes right down to it, a whore. She is no longer the beautiful virgin one went to war and risked one’s life for back in the idealistic days of 1914. Nevertheless, Germany is one’s own. One wants to do the right thing by her. Therefore one becomes a Vernunftrepublikaner — a Republican of Reason, not of love. Love in all its forms is disintegrating: love for one’s country as well as love for the opposite sex, the family, and God.

The prostitute becomes one of many symbols of female sexuality in the Weimar Republic. She is, after all, the first career woman. The prostitute is the woman who is already integrated into a market economy. She knows that everything has its price. And most important, she knows that love is a

22 Ernst Johannsen, Vier von der Infanterie: Ihre letzten Tage an der Westfront 1918, (Hamburg: Fackelreiter, 1929), 69.
23 Horkheimer and Adorno, 128.
24 Johannsen, 23.
26 Klaus Theweleit refers to the sexual functionalization of woman as “the reduction of the woman to her vagina” (“die Reduzierung der Frau auf die Vagina”). Klaus Theweleit, Männerphantasien (Frankfurt: Roter Stern, 1977), v. 1, 439. Available in English translation by Stephen Conway in collaboration with Erica Carter and Chris Turner as Male Fantasies (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).
27 Horkheimer and Adorno, 129.
28 On prostitutes in the work of one Weimar author, see Belinda Carstens, Prostitution in the Works of Ödön von Horváth (Stuttgart: Hans-Dieter Heinz, 1982).
illusion and a danger to her economic success. For her, love is not an ideal, but a commodity. As the prostitutes of Mahagonny sing, “We are the cuties of Mahagonny/By paying well, you'll get whatever you like.”29 The men waiting in line know that time is money, and so they try to get their business done as quickly as possible. The prostitute becomes a symbol for Weimar woman in general, now thrown from the protection of the patriarchal family unit and forced to sell herself on the open market.

Bertolt Brecht’s plays throughout the Weimar period, from Baal through the Threepenny Opera, give ample evidence of sexual cynicism. Love as a romantic idealization of an adored person is hard to find in Brecht’s plays. Baal is the vitalistic sex god immune to weak human attachments, the city Mahagonny is the city where everything, including every sexual perversion, is allowed, and Mack the Knife, that friendly rapist, murderer, and thief, ridicules the very institution of marriage by entertaining several wives and making a mockery of the marriage ceremony itself. He “marries” Polly in a warehouse full of stolen goods, and the officiating preacher is scared witless by Mack’s lawless brutality.30 Mack’s one failing is not his romantic attachment to women but rather his insatiable need for sex, what is described in one song as “Sexual Bondage.”31 The great Mack is a slave not to love but to sex. Andreas Kragler, the veteran hero of Brecht’s Drums in the Night, becomes for Brecht the embodiment of Weimar sobriety and Weimar sexual morality. Kragler returns home after four years to find his girlfriend pregnant by and celebrating her engagement to a man for whom she feels no love—all to the tune of a popular song called “I Pray to the Power of Love.” “You are a whore!” Kragler tells his girlfriend Anna, adding to his friends,

One ought to beat her, beat her, beat her! Throw stones at her, throw trash at her! We ought to destroy your little tummy, you shameless hussy! Aren’t you in heat? Does the little bundle of joy feel good in your belly? Shameless hussy!32 But venting his feelings apparently makes Kragler reconsider. After all, his girlfriend is a wealthy heiress, and he has no money; so he betrays the political revolution which, in his misery, he had helped to start, flees the vengeance of the reaction, and announces to his comrades: “I am a swine, and this swine is going home” ("Ich bin ein Schwein, und das Schwein geht heim").33 For Brecht

29 Brecht, Mahagonny, 29.
31 Brecht, Threepenny Opera, 40. Manheim and Willett translate the word “Hörigkeit” as “obsession,” i.e. “Want it or not, he can’t ignore the call/Sexual obsession has him in its thrall.” However “Hörigkeit” is more accurately translated as “bondage.”
33 Brecht, Trommeln in der Nacht, ed. Schwiedrzik, 73.

this declaration becomes the slogan of Neue Sachlichkeit itself. Kragler takes his slutty wife back home. He does not love her, but he is a realist—a Vernunft-republikaner in the realm of love. In general, the sentence “I am a swine,” declared with no desire to change oneself for the better, could stand as the slogan of Weimar cynicism. The newspaper editor Münzer in Erich Kästner’s novel Fabian echoes the same sentiments, and for the same reasons: “Ich bin ein Schwein.”34 Such a sentence epitomizes enlightened false consciousness.

An interesting contrast to Brecht’s depictions of male sexual cynicism, which teeter precariously between celebration and condemnation, is the other great German playwright of the 1920s, Ernst Toller. Far from celebrating a world in which the idealization of love has been eliminated, as the early Brecht sometimes seems to, Ernst Toller mourns the passing of expressionist ideals for a better world, including a better love. Whereas Brecht emphasizes the freedom engendered by the breaking of traditional moral taboos, Toller emphasizes the pain of loss. While Brecht’s heroes are sexually vital and unmistakably, enthusiastically, heterosexually male, Toller’s classic antihero is the unfortunate veteran Eugen Hinkemann, who returns from the war no longer the strong, handsome man he used to be but rather castrated and unable to satisfy his wife sexually. Lacking a penis, Hinkemann is tormented by the sexual cynicism of the Weimar world around him, which asserts that love is nothing but a four letter word. Hinkemann fears that his wife scorns and despises him, and he is overjoyed, if only briefly, to discover that in fact his wife loves him not for his body but for his soul. As he tells his friends, “He knew that she loved him in spite of everything. The woman ... how can I put it? ... it doesn’t even seem possible.... The woman loved ... his soul.”35 Hinkemann is a romantic idealist. And yet Hinkemann’s longing for romantic, spiritual love is completely out of step with the world around him, which is peopled with prostitutes, pimps, and other sexual cynics. In order to earn a living for his wife, Hinkemann takes a job as a circus strong man where, to the “here comes the bride, all dressed in white” tune of the wedding march from Wagner’s Lohengrin, Hinkemann bites off the necks of live rats: “Here comes the bride” — chomp — “All dressed in white” — chomp, and so on.36 So much for marriage. Because of his longing for a spiritual love, Hinkemann is viewed by his contemporaries as stupid, unenlightened. When a little boy comes by pimpering for his thirteen-year old sister, Hinkemann buys him something to eat, but the little boy, already “enlightened,” views this act of kindness as an act of stupidity: “Oh, you’re so stupid ... you don’t understand me.”37 By the end of the play Hinkemann, deeply despondent and believing that all of modern German culture is organized around the denial of vulnerability and the worship of the Phallus invulnerable to love, ritually burns a masculine Greek sex god with an enlarged Phallus in his fireplace. By the time he finds out that the supposed false consciousness that his wife loved him for

34 Kästner, 35.
36 Toller, Hinkemann, 36.
37 Toller, Hinkemann, 35.
his soul is not an illusion at all but true, it is too late. The tormented woman has committed suicide.

Hinkemann is a kind of romantic Rip van Winkle, a traveler from the prewar era lost in the sober, loveless objectivity of the Weimar Republic. He has a time traveler companion in Ernst Toller’s classic depiction of the lifestyle of Neue Sachlichkeit, Hooray, We’re Alive! Although he possesses functioning masculine sex organs, this play’s hero, Karl Thomas, is just as lost without love as Hinkemann had been. A refugee from the revolutionary, expressionist era in which one fought hard, loved deeply, and made the revolution for a better world, Karl Thomas cannot get used to a world devoid of love, revolution, and belief. Emerging from eight years in jail, he finds himself in the middle of so-called “relative economic stabilization” in the year 1927, the height of Neue Sachlichkeit. He sings mournfully, “I’ve lost track of the world/The world has lost track of me.” 31 In this sober, objective era, all ideologies and dreams of a better world have been unmasked. All utopias are dead, including the utopia of love. What remains is technology and engineering. When Karl Thomas meets Eva Berg, his old lover and fellow revolutionary, he wants to give himself to her completely, to worship her as her lover, but he finds that she has changed fundamentally. “You shall be my tomorrow and my dream of the future. It’s you, you I want, and nothing else,” he declares expressionistically to her. But she, all Neue Sachlichkeit, replies

Eva: I have to be alone. Please understand me.
Karl: Don’t you belong to me?
Eva: Belong? That word is dead. No one belongs to anyone else.
Karl: Forgive me, I chose the wrong word. Aren’t I your lover?
Eva: You mean because I’ve slept with you?
Karl: Doesn’t that bind us together?
Eva: Exchanging glances with a stranger on a windy street can bind me closer than any night of passion. A night of passion doesn’t need to be anything more than a very pretty game.

“Is anything holy for you?” asks Karl. “Why use mystical words for human things?” she replies, adding: “I notice, when I speak to you, that the last eight years, in which you were ‘buried,’ have changed us more than a century would usually.” When Karl tells Eva that during his eight years in prison the fire of idealism has died in Germany, she replies that it is not completely dead, but rather less dramatic, less emotional, more objective. She explains that if humanity is to reach its sober, enlightened goals it has to get rid of all romantic illusions and delusions. “We can’t afford to be children any more,” she says. 39 One has to be a realist about politics, economics, and love. Eva, who works a full-time job at a chemical factory, and belongs to her trade union and to the SPD, now has two children by another man. These children, astounded by Karl’s

revolutionary romanticism, cannot believe that he was stupid enough to want to create a world governed by brotherly love.

Fritz: And were you stupid enough to think you could win?
Grete: Yea, you were really stupid.
Karl Thomas: (stares at them) What are you saying?
Fritz: You were stupid.
Grete: Really stupid. 40

Just like the little boy pimping for his sister in Hinkemann, these are sober children without any illusions. It is the older Karl Thomas, still stuck in history, revolution, and love, who is the child.

Fritz Lang’s classic film Metropolis clearly shows the links between sexual cynicism and all other forms of Weimar cynicism. In Metropolis illusion and cynicism are embodied by the real Mary, full of love and goodness, and the counterfeit, cynical Mary, a man-made sex machine consisting of metal and electronic circuits. 41 The real Mary represents not just real love but also real religion and real concern for workers’ well-being. The cynical Mary represents not love but sex, which she uses to ensnare men, wreak havoc in the city, and destroy children. Significantly, our own self-creating rock star of the Reagan-Bush era, Madonna, used the cynical Mary as her role model of self-expression in the video version of her hit “Express Yourself.” But Madonna did not stay to the end of Metropolis. The final scene of Metropolis represents a triumph of real love over cynicism — where else but at the gate of the cathedral? Metropolis is an expression not just of Weimar cynicism but of Weimar discomfort with cynicism, with the Weimar longing for an overcoming of cynicism and for wholeness — for the heart to mediate between the head and the hand. Between cynicism and stupidity, the emotionally and spiritually deprived long for a Third Reich of romantic love and economic harmony.

A listing of important expressions of sexual cynicism in the literature, film, art, and music of the Weimar Republic could go on indefinitely. But it is my intention here to tease out implications, not to create an exhaustive catalogue. In order to get a female viewpoint on sexual cynicism, however, I would like to mention in slightly more detail Irmgard Keun’s Gilgi — One of Us. 42 Gilgi is the young 1920s career girl for whom, as Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, love has become impossible. Keun’s novel demonstrates at some length precisely why love has become impossible: because love is at odds with the structure of advanced capitalism, which requires everyone to work outside the home.

40 Toller, Hoppla, 51.
42 Irmgard Keun, Gilgi — Eine von uns (Düsseldorf: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1989). I am grateful to Vibeke Petersen and her work in progress on sexuality and gender in Weimar for insight into this novel and into Weimar gender roles.

38 Ernst Toller, Hoppla, wir leben! (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1978), 90.
39 Toller, Hoppla!, 46.
Gilgi cannot hold down a job and be an independent economic unit at the same time that she is head over heels in love with a man. Love simply is not practical from an economic viewpoint. Gilgi has learned to use sex to get ahead in life, but she also knows that she can not let it get control of her. The novel shows Gilgi's complete rejection of her own family, as well as the impossibility of the traditional family unit under the economic conditions of the German 1920s. In one particularly brutal scene, a former lover of Gilgi's kills himself, his wife, and his children because he cannot support them. Alone, he could survive, but saddled with a family he is doomed. Gilgi learns this lesson well. At the beginning of the novel "she has her tiny life tightly in her hand," in the middle of the novel she is derailed by love, and by the end of the novel she has become her own woman again and is literally on the train again to a career of her own, as well as to personal loneliness. At the end of the novel Gilgi turns her back on unrealistic, romantic love and sets off for Berlin, there to make her way on her own. Gilgi is the literary embodiment of the growing female secretarial class whose culture and increasing importance Siegfried Kracauer examined in his study The White Collar Employees, and whose thwarted emotional needs are funneled into what Horkheimer and Adorno called the "culture industry." Where love fails as a great, lived emotion and experience of commitment between two human beings, it can at least be trivialized ad nauseam in popular songs — what Keun calls the "stupid little melody that sticks in your head." As Kracauer wrote of one young woman long before the onset of the Roberta Flack era, "It is not she who knows every hit song; rather, it is the hit songs that know her, that are emptying her out and killing her softly." Just as Hinkemann had experienced his tragedy to the tunes of Lehar's Merry Widow operetta, so Gilgi goes through the entire novel that bears her name singing and humming various mindless popular hits. In her infatuation with and subjugation to popular culture, Gilgi is precisely like Brecht's and Toller's characters and the secretaries analyzed by Kracauer.

A subcategory of sexual cynicism is the rejection, even the taboization of pregnancy and motherhood, all conditions closely connected to family formation. The new woman with her flapper look is not a mother. She is flat-chested, with thin hips. Pregnancy and children are a disaster for her. It is Gilgi's pregnancy which brings on her crisis. Bertolt Brecht suggested that for the Weimar bourgeoisie pregnancy was a "sexually transmitted disease," and Siegfried Kracauer wrote that although they are entirely conventional in most ways and want to "catch" a man, Weimar girls "do not want to have any children." In Erich Kästner's novel Fabian, the title character suggests that "our country is not currently focused on seeing to it that new generations emerge." The literature of the Weimar Republic is a reflection of a society in which abortion had become a major legal and moral issue. In the debates that went on then, we can see the crystallization of front lines and conflicts that continue to this day in both Germany and the United States.

While it is Gilgi herself who recognizes the economic impossibility of love and turns her back on it, the character Berta in Marieluise Fleisser's play Pioneers in Ingolstadt would like love but is refused it. Her lover Krol, whom Fleisser based in part on Bertolt Brecht himself, tells her after sleeping with her that love is impossible:

Berta: Was that all?
Krol: Why do you ask? Was something missing?
Berta: We left out the most important thing. We left out love.
Krol: There doesn't have to be any love...

... Berta: But I can't live like that.
Krol: You're going to have to.

One of the many reasons for Marlene Dietrich's phenomenal and enduring success as a popular singer and movie star is that she became the symbol of the non-effeminate, non-romantic female. In her movies and songs, she had discarded the ideology of love and had become as cold, hard, and cynical as any man. When Professor Rath proposes marriage to her in The Blue Angel, she laughs at him just as delightedly, if not as derisively, as Dulcinea had laughed at Don Quixote. And in the song "Where is the Man?" ("Wo ist der Mann?") she turns the tables on male sexual cynics like Brecht and Marinetti and accuses men of being hopeless, naive romantics who mistake sex for love. A 1920s incarnation of Frank Wedekind's Lulu, Dietrich became the female sexual cynic men both desired and feared. Her enlightened false consciousness posed an existential sexual threat but also an irresistible challenge. Her message and the message of Neue Sachlichkeit in general seemed to be that enlightened, modern human beings would have to resign themselves to lives without love. Like God, Santa Claus, and ideologies of a better world, love was a fairy tale that one outgrew as an adult.

Yet the popular songs, the incessant harping on love, and the marketing of love as a commodity point to the survival of love as ideology even in a modern, enlightened world. What seems lost in the higher culture finds refuge in the growing mass culture. Tristan and Isolde may have left the opera stage, but they can now become an operetta or a musical, where instead of the Liebestod the audience can eat its love and have it too in a "happily ever after." What is lost in lived experience and in high culture becomes the stuff of the new mythology of

43 Keun, 5, 171.
44 Siegfried Kracauer, Die Angestellten (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971).
45 Keun, 171.
46 Kracauer, 68.
47 Kracauer, 69. Kracauer uses the word "Mädchen" or "girls."
48 Kästner, 75.

49 Marieluise Fleisser, Gesammelte Werke, v. 1 (Dramen) (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), 182-3. This is the 1968 version of the play, slightly changed from the 1929 version, although the section cited is not significantly different. I am grateful to Belinda Carstens Wickham and her unpublished paper at the 1992 German Studies Association conference for insight into this play and its sexual politics.
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War Neurosis and Weimar Cinema:
The Demonization of the Home Front.

Laurence Rickels