

RAGE AGAINST THE TIME MACHINE: PESSIMISM'S AHISTORICAL ETHICS VS. CYNICISM'S RESIGNATION TO PROGRESS¹

*"It has to start somewhere. It has to start sometime.
What better place than here? What better time than now?"*
– Rage Against the Machine²

Introduction: Calling Out Regress, Benightedness, Inhumanity

Often credited with the first workable synthesis of rap and metal, Los Angeles group Rage Against the Machine tapped into two music genres and two sources of resentment in the United States and around the world – one based at the very least on race, the other based at the very least on class.

Their song "Guerrilla Radio" speaks of hijacking radio frequencies to take over Washington, D.C. in an effort, by extension, to rescue the developing world from the corruption of fixed elections and deals with multinational banks based in the North Atlantic. It speaks of the inequality of globalization, but in the language of the twentieth century, before the advent of social media and the War on Terror.

Mexican-American lead singer Zack de la Rocha's incisive lyrics, however, are certainly not the first such lines warning that one person's progress is another person's destitution, that brands of humanism do not necessarily value all human beings (or other creatures), that enlightenment can be hard to come by when we buy into collective romanticism. Pessimists of the early nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, notably Italian lyric poet and moralist Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837) and Romanian philosopher E. M. Cioran (1911-1995), made critiques similar to De la Rocha's. We may draw lessons from the pessimist *weltanschauung* that are more constructive to our present circumstances than the critiques of the cynical "school" like the popular German cultural theorist Peter Sloterdijk (b. 1947).

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented at the American Comparative Literature Association annual meeting at New York University on March 22, 2014. Thanks to panel organizers John Brenkman (The Graduate Center & Baruch College, CUNY) and Sorin Radu Cucu (LaGuardia Community College, CUNY).

² Rage Against the Machine, "Guerrilla Radio," *The Battle for Los Angeles*, CD, Epic Records, 1999.

As many have noted, Sloterdijk is an heir to Nietzsche and Heidegger in that, like them both, he sees “the death of God” as the problem of our age, coupled with our lack of awareness that “the gods have fled.” His working metaphors for the constellation of issues that supposedly surround the rise of secularism – bubbles, globes, foam, crystal palace – are useful in conceptualizing globalization’s economic, political, and ecological landscape. But such metaphors are only useful in understanding how to combat the ills of globalization and agonal politics – financial oligarchies, resource depletion, overpopulation, profound inequality between the global North and South – if one does not neglect to address their ethical utility. Like his predecessors, Sloterdijk is unable to move beyond his own metaphors and devise a means of grounding practical agency in order to address such extremely grave socio-economic problems. Sloterdijk’s work, especially in his magnum opus, the *Sphären [Spheres]* trilogy,³ presents us with many elegant and fascinating ways of re-conceptualizing our problems, but such affirmative, vitalist theorizations of liberal capitalism are inadequate to the task of meliorating its flaws, for they fall into the trap of irresponsible optimism that he often critiques and which many attribute to the legacy of the Enlightenment.

Exploring the supposedly Enlightenment-induced causes of the destruction of absolute ontological and moral truth has been a hallmark of Sloterdijk’s work from the beginning. In his initial best-seller, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft [Critique of Cynical Reason]* (1983), he addresses this constellation of issues through the lens of modern cynicism, as a generalized ironic malaise rather than in its noble ancient form. In *Spheres* (1998–2004), he re-conceptualizes the forms of this secular fallout in an opposition between the holistic spatialities of the legacy of Greco-Latin thought and the foam-like spatialities with which we supposedly deal today. And more recently, in *Zorn und Zeit [Rage and Time]* (2010) – whose title self-consciously riffs on Heidegger’s 1927 masterwork *Sein und Zeit [Being and Time]* – Sloterdijk pursues this Nietzschean-Heideggerian problematic further by looking at the politics of the affect of anger in Hellenism, Judaism, Communism, and mass consumerism. However, prominent throughout his career has been Sloterdijk’s own “cruel optimism” – to use affect studies scholar Lauren Berlant’s term for when what one desires is actually an obstacle to one’s flourishing.⁴ That is to say, despite being a critic of supposed Enlightenment optimism, Sloterdijk falls into the same irresponsibly optimistic patterns. One must be careful about assigning blame to the Enlightenment for the prob-

3 Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären I – Blasen, Mikrosphärologie* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1998); Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären II – Globen, Makrosphärologie* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 1999); and Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären III – Schäume, Plurale Sphärologie* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 2004).

4 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011) 1. Berlant herself is not exactly a pessimist; rather she advocates that Americans and Europeans free themselves from the post-war promises of “the good life”: upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and durable intimacy, which she feels have become obstructionist fantasies since the 1980s.

lems of modernity, however – something that was done by the Right, beginning with the anti-philosophes in late-eighteenth-century France, and by the Left in the post-World War II era, with figures such as Horkheimer and Adorno – for this conflates particular historical moments with the longer recent history of the West. As historian Darrin M. McMahon argues,

Widely influential, this line of inquiry has been adopted and embellished by later, postmodern critics, who have charged the Enlightenment with nurturing many of the ills of modernity: totalitarianism, environmental destruction, the hegemony of reason, racism, anti-Semitism, imperialism, misogyny, and moral tyranny. Gestating in the Enlightenment's own, dark underbelly, this insidious dialectical force emerged to ravage the world.⁵

Undoubtedly, it can be difficult to disentangle the import of the Industrial Revolution's changes in human labor and emphasis on scientific progress from the Enlightenment move toward more secularized forms of authority. Values that seem common today – freedom of speech, basic civil rights, and free-market capitalism – were deemed incredibly dangerous by the ruling authorities and status quo in Bourbon France.

A term like “Counter-Enlightenment,” though, often causes more confusion than clarity, for it is generally meant to designate a Leftist, twentieth-century set of values, while the first critics of the Enlightenment were conservative, monarchist Catholics. These critics predicted that the French Revolution, the triumph of the philosophes, would lead to the bloody demolition of all the European institutions responsible for civilization and indeed, in the wake of Robespierre's Terror, rewrote their own history, combining their predictions with real events to create an interpretation of the Enlightenment as ethically unmooring Western civilization that is still, to a large degree, with us. The anti-philosophe arguments, which tended to be reductive in the extreme, in an effort to appeal to the widest possible audience, relied on techniques that British philosopher Roger Scruton finds prominent in the arsenal of the twenty-first-century political Right: onus-shifting, false expertise, transferred blame, hermeticism, scapegoating.⁶ Such techniques, Scruton argues, are worth examination “since they show the way in which human beings conspire to avoid the truth, whenever the truth requires a painful change in routines.”⁷ And, indeed, this avoidance of truth lies at the heart of all globalization debates

5 Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001), 201.

6 Roger Scruton, *The Uses of Pessimism and the Dangers of False Hope* (Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2010), 167-193.

7 Roger Scruton, *The Uses of Pessimism and the Dangers of False Hope*, 168. For a perfect example of how the false expertise technique is used in the United States, see New York University Food Studies professor Marion Nestle's “Coopting Nutrition Professionals,” in *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002), 111-136.

– we have seen the catastrophic consequences of corrupt, runaway neoliberalism for the poor, wildlife, natural resources, etc., yet the tiny minority in power (and really, the global 10% of us generally) become further entrenched in their habits, accepting the extinction of species and the disenfranchised as simply collateral damage of “progress.”

Philosophies of negation, such as pessimism, though, have been more ethically responsible in confronting such painful changes in routine than affirmative theorizations, no matter how cynical, because they have tended to be more realistic about such problems as globalization evinces. Pessimists tend to take into account the suffering of all creatures in an effort to establish ethical frameworks within which everyone can live, regardless of distinctions of class, race, gender, or even species. Sloterdijk's general *modus operandi*, conversely, is to mine the Western traditions in philosophy, literature, and art for new ideological resources and examples with which to diagnose our problems. One polarization at the heart of this is between the traditions of Heidegger and Marx, between the question of whether the point of theory is to interpret the world in various ways or to change it. I would argue that interpretations of the world are only worth making if they attempt to lead to change. Although, I would also point out that Marx, though credited with the line of thinking that involves change, offered no more answers than the supposed Heideggerian tradition. Marx also diagnoses but, in terms of action, he just calls for destruction, for “tearing asunder”; when asked what would come in capitalism's wake, he had no real practical, workable solutions. Hence the communist scramble that Sloterdijk laments. Nevertheless, in the spirit of exploring re-conceptions of the world that lead to practical action, this essay calls for a reconsideration of lessons from the pessimist tradition, particularly from the writings of Leopardi and Cioran. While Leopardi and Cioran are not generally considered to be among the most politically-active pessimists – like Albert Camus, for example – certain aspects of their worldviews may serve to liberate readers from constrictive ways of thinking that foster inequality. The ancient Greek cynicism Sloterdijk has extolled sought to defer judgment, but the pessimists not only judge their present circumstances; they provide frameworks with which to deal with our bittersweet realities. They purposely burst our bubbles and then tell us what to do in their disappointing absence. They show us that ethical systems that are meant to replace religion are not the problem so much as our conceptions of time and history, which lead us to act unethically toward others.

1. The Progress of Nihilism

Sloterdijk turned 21 years old in 1968, the year of attempted Leftist revolutions around the globe, and he has repeatedly remarked since that he was upset then by the fact that he and the other European intellectuals of his generation were incredibly deft handlers of Critical Theory but had no idea whatsoever

how to apply that theory to the complex political and socio-economic issues of the day. They were wonderful diagnosticians, but poor healers. The result, for Sloterdijk, was two forms of cynicism – one as a problem and one as a solution. When his *Critique of Cynical Reason* appeared in 1983, some saw it as a welcome counter-thrust to the neoliberal policies that were developing in the Reagan-Thatcher era. In this work, as is by now well known, Sloterdijk makes a distinction between the philosophical cynicism of ancient Greeks such as the holy fool-like Diogenes and the popular cynicism of post-1968 Europe, arguing that the concept of cynicism had been degraded from its original usage as an outlet for the disempowered masses to mere irony and sarcasm driven by capitalist forces. But rather than attacking the Reagan-Thatcher nexus head-on, his solutions to this problem sound very much like a return to '60s counter-cultural values: an emphasis on spontaneity, authenticity, movement away from rationalism and back to the body.

In Sloterdijk's work since the early 1980s, and particularly since the late '90s, he has elaborated on the malaise of the disappointed '68 generation through a particular historiographical worldview that sees the Enlightenment faith in progress and the more radical communist faith in revolution as replacing religious faith, which had given humans direction for millennia – the immanent replacing the transcendent, with all of the attendant moral crises. This is not a new historical scheme; indeed, it is a well-trod one, beginning with the anti-philosophes, and I don't completely disagree with Sloterdijk on this. The relationship between secularization and ethics is a major issue, particularly as it concerns the relationships between government and business, but I think our continued emphasis on historical progress is a far bigger problem, leading the planet to catastrophic changes that may make some of these questions moot by the end of this century.

In *Spheres*, Sloterdijk attempts to rescue religion's ability to ground human beings in communities of understanding while discarding dogma that he finds unconstructive, an attempt to overcome the sense of homelessness that pervades his work. This is the essence of the sphere metaphor. Spheres such as religion provide contexts from which to derive our ethics – as well as feelings of comfort and stability – and without them our very humanity is in peril. Indeed, without religion, one must still have a framework for ethics, but religion, or even religious trappings shorn of their dogma, do not provide the only sphere in which ethics can be established. Such a view is a continuation of some of the earliest counter-Enlightenment arguments – against the “pessimiste” Voltaire, in particular. It is also an attempt to replace faith with reason, without teasing out how such different foundations can hold up the same edifice. In this respect, Sloterdijk himself seems to live in bubbles of his own creation.

As Adam Kirsch and other commentators have pointed out,⁸ while Heidegger was profoundly skeptical of the redemptive power of reason in the form of technology, and felt that only God could save us from ourselves, Sloterdijk takes quite the opposite tack, arguing that human beings can indeed save ourselves through our manipulation of technology. They may both be right – Heidegger was right that perdition lay in technology, as we see in the ecological devastation that is dramatically accelerating due to technology that exponentially expands our ability to extract natural resources; and Sloterdijk may be correct in arguing that only technology can fix the problems that we have created. Certainly, it is likely that we will push technology ever further in our attempts to outrun our problems, such as the extreme lengths we now go to in order to pump oil out of the permafrost or the ocean floor. There's too much money to be made in trying – for a select few – for us to give it up.

But while critics like Kirsch see Sloterdijk's work as an active response to the problem of nihilism in liberal civilization, I see mostly intellectualizations of the problem on his part. Sloterdijk is content with re-cataloguing or re-categorizing old problems like secular ethics without offering any means of addressing them. It is not insignificant that he is professor of philosophy and media theory at the Karlsruhe University of Art and Design, for he engages dozens of art historical examples of spheres of belonging, but as many have noted, *Spheres* reads like a giant meandering prose poem (like it was intended to be read by poet Yves Bonnefoy, which I grant often makes for very fun reading) rather than an argument that follows a logical sequence. Sloterdijk has remarked that he thought of the writing of it as one would a novel, but many readers have wondered why he has exposed them to such a heterogeneous group of materials in so haphazard a fashion. Indeed, as Brazilian scholar Bárbara Freitag Rouanet has remarked, "Upon reflection, the reader fears that the bubbles, globes and foam may explode, evaporate."⁹

For the Pessimists, however, a recognition of the needs and rights of all – much less what spheres make us most comfortable – is predicated on a larger issue: our place in time and thus our conceptions of history. But the pessimists have treatments for illnesses of temporality. After writing several books in his native Romanian, E. M. Cioran addresses these issues in one of his first French-language works, *Précis de décomposition [A Short History of Decay]* (1949), arguing,

Hegel is chiefly responsible for modern optimism. How could he have failed to see that consciousness changes only its forms and modalities, but never progresses? Becoming excludes an absolute fulfillment, a goal: the

8 Adam Kirsch, "Against Cynicism: A philosopher's brilliant reasons for living." *New Republic*. 19 Jul 2013. Web. 25 Feb 2014.

9 Bárbara Freitag Rouanet, "The Trilogy Spheres of Peter Sloterdijk," *Journal of Oriental Studies* 21 (Aug 2011), pp. 40-56, 84.

temporal adventure unfolds without an aim external to itself, and will end when its possibilities of movement are exhausted.¹⁰

For Cioran, the hope and succor for which religion was traditionally responsible has been replaced with an unsatisfying secular hope that ignores the deplorable track record of human history, a history that can only be seen honestly as one of destruction. Thus, Cioran is concerned with the contemporary theme of progress, arguing, as political theorist Joshua Foa Dienstag glosses him, that “the telos of progress has become an idol, and is used to justify violence and a loss of freedom in the present. When we become captive to historical thinking, they [pessimists] argue, we forget how to live in the here and now.”¹¹ Thus, Cioran is also concerned about the foundations of secular ethics, but sees reconceptualizing time as an aid in establishing an actual workable system.

More than a century earlier, right around the time of Hegel’s death, Giacomo Leopardi was similarly concerned with Europeans’ misguided faith in progress. In his *Operette Morali* [*Short Moral Works*] (1835) – a series of 24 dialogues and fictional essays, composed in his small town in the Papal States between 1823 and 1828, which treat a variety of moral themes that had already become familiar to readers through his earlier lyric poetry, his first *Canti* [*Songs*] (1818) – Leopardi uses the term “moral” not in the sense of merely respectable but in the fuller sense of exploring the questions of ethical philosophy: How should we live and how can we justify our actions? In so doing, Leopardi thoroughly critiques what he sees as the ethical decline of his age and, as one might imagine, his criticism was not well received. As translator Patrick Creagh notes,

Its overt materialism was tough meat for a generation in the throes of the kind of religious renaissance that came hand-in-glove with the restoration of the old order after the fall Napoleon. Nor could the view it gave of man and society please in an age in which the more liberal thinkers believed in the perfectibility of man, and the inevitable progress of humanity in a boundlessly expandable technological future.¹²

Leopardi’s critique of the belief in the “inevitable progress of humanity in a boundlessly expandable technological future” is precisely what may be applied to today’s continual emphasis on economic growth and the supposed panacea

¹⁰ E. M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay* (Richard Howard, trans. New York: Arcade, 1975), 146. “Hegel est le grand responsable de l’optimisme moderne. Comment n’a-t-il pas vu que la conscience change seulement ses formes et ses modalités, mais ne progresse nullement? Le devenir exclut un accomplissement absolu, un but: l’aventure temporelle se déroule sans une visée extérieure à elle, et finira lorsque ses possibilités de cheminer seront épuisées.” E. M. Cioran, *Œuvres* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1995), 707.

¹¹ Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006), 122.

¹² Giacomo Leopardi, *The Moral Essays* (Patrick Creagh, trans., New York: Columbia UP, 1983), 16.

of science. Leopardi, Cioran, and Sloterdijk all blame the Enlightenment for this, but Leopardi and Cioran do not share Sloterdijk's view that progress is still possible. Instead, they advocate for other interpretations of human beings' importance in the universe.

2. Suffering is Forever, and That's Okay

The recent introduction of the term "anthropocene" into our cultural lexicon, which indicates that human impact on the Earth can now be measured in stratigraphic time despite the fact that ours is a much briefer period than any other geologic epoch, indicates that we must now confront the possibility that the meliorism of the human condition, or that of any other species, may not be possible. Indeed, one cannot deny that progress has been achieved in certain areas – such as medicine, or on specific social issues like marriage equality in the United States – but it is very difficult to show that such advancements result in the net improvement of the human condition. For example, the introduction of the ultrasound and sonogram to India in 1979 helped doctors recognize birth defects in advance, but it also resulted in a huge uptick in female feticide, a problem that persists to this day.¹³ The fact that India is overpopulated and that many of these girls would have gone on to harsh lives, does not compensate for the fact that such selective abortion is highly problematic from a human rights point of view. This is an example of why the pessimist views history as ironic. The technology is only an advance if the social mores in that milieu are in place to conceive of and use it as such.

Post-Enlightenment philosophy has usually worked from the premise that the human condition must improve gradually, a premise from which Sloterdijk also works. Pessimists, though, refute this claim, arguing that we must understand that natural life involves suffering, figure out how to deal with this fact, recognize our limitations, and get through life as non-injurious as possible. As Dienstag puts it, "Pessimism's goal is not to depress us, but to edify us about our condition and to fortify us for the life that lies ahead."¹⁴ In this respect, I see pessimism as a form of realism. A very necessary one. This realism is taken to the point of satire in Leopardi's opening piece in the *Short Moral Works*: "Storia del Genere Umano" [History of the Human Race], a caustic story that devolves into the disappearance of nations, not due to unity, but rather to a globalization process based purely on self-interest:

¹³ See one study, among many, by University of Delhi researchers Sneha Lata Tandon and Renu Sharma: "Female Foeticide and Infanticide in India: An Analysis of Crimes against Girl Children," *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences* 1.1 (Jan 2006), or, more recently, KumKum Dasgupta, "India's missing girls: fears grow over rising levels of foeticide," *The Guardian*, 9 Apr 2014. Web. 29 Jul 2015.

¹⁴ Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism* xi.

and not only learning and charity, but the very names of the various countries and nations will everywhere become extinct; so that all men will be gathered, as they will be in the habit of saying, into one single country or nation, as it was in the beginning, and profess universal love towards their whole species; though in fact, scattering the human race into as many peoples as there are men. Therefore as no one will have a country which he is particularly bound to love, or foreigners to hate, each one will hate all others, and the whole of his kind love only himself.¹⁵

One can certainly imagine the names of nations being replaced by those of corporations, just as a character in Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* (1950) imagines human beings colonizing Mars and giving geographical features names like the "Rockefeller Canal" and the "Dupont Sea." This is taken a step further in the animated Pixar film *Wall-e* (2008), in which what remains of humanity is taking a 700-year space cruise while robots clean up Earth, all globally governed by the one remaining corporation, Buy-n-Large. Along these lines, although he did not imagine the technology, Leopardi undoubtedly would have seen social media as isolating individuals in petty allegiances rather than promoting universal understanding. Part of the reason for the devolution he explores in this piece is the fact that human freedom, for him, is an illusion, because human beings are always limited by the unidirectional march of time and the selfishness it fosters.

Relatedly, the mandates of the ephemeral dictate that reason itself is destined to produce unhappiness, as we see in Leopardi's "Detti Memorabili di Filippo Ottonieri" [Memorable Sayings of Philip Ottonieri]. Here, a fictitious philosopher finds that the senses and intellect of modern man are so dulled by distraction that he is amused by that which is insignificant and fleeting while what is truly amazing and permanent is beyond his perception and ken. For Ottonieri, even Leopardi's kindred pessimistic spirit, Rousseau, would be a nobody as compared with someone like Democritus, who developed the atomic theory of the universe: "anyone who lived as differently from us as did those philosophers from the Greeks of their time, would not be taken for a singular man, but in public opinion would be banished, so to speak, from the human species."¹⁶ Certainly, like Sloterdijk, Leopardi looks upon

15 Giacomo Leopardi, *The Moral Essays* 42. "e non pure lo studio e la carità, ma il nome stesso delle nazioni e delle patrie sarà spento per ogni dove; recandosi tutti gli uomini, secondo che essi saranno usati di dire, in una sola nazione e patria, come fu da principio, e facendo professione di amore universale verso tutta la loro specie; ma veramente dissipandosi la stirpe umana in tanti popoli quanti saranno uomini. Perciocché non di proponendo né patria da dovere particolarmente amare, né strani da odiare; ciascheduno odierà tutti gli altri, amando solo, di tutto il suo genere, se medesimo." Giacomo Leopardi, *Opere Morali* (Sergio Solmi, ed. Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1976), 13-14.

16 Giacomo Leopardi, *The Moral Essays* 139 "oggi chiunque visse tanto diversamente da noi quanto vissero quei filosofi dai Greci del loro tempo, non sarebbe avuto per uomo singolare, ma nella opinione pubblica, sarebbe escluso, per dir così, dalla specie umana" Giacomo Leopardi, *Opere Morali* 123.

the Greco-Latin ages with rose-colored glasses but, given the pace of technological life and ever-proliferating forms of distraction in the twenty-first century, the simplicity of life before the Internet and smartphones, much less the early nineteenth century, seems like a distant memory. Have these things brought people closer? Well, yes and no. Have they helped the causes of global democracy, as we saw in the tweets from Iran during the riots following the “re-election” of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009? Yes, sort of. Have they brought about any lasting change, despite the fact that the advent of the Internet is a tectonic shift in human history? So far, I don’t think so. Modern life appears to be more diverse, but it is only what is diverse that has changed. We may be surrounded by more human beings of differing ethnicities and we may be immersed in a more diverse consumer landscape, but the number of languages humans use or animal species with which we co-exist has dramatically decreased. For there to be more lasting change we would have to follow the example of Ottonieri and slow down, accept less, understand limits.

This illness of distraction and misunderstanding is further explored in Leopardi’s wonderful “Dialogo della Moda e della Morte” [Dialogue of Fashion and Death], in which Fashion goes out of her way to show Death that she is her sister, that she causes people, in the unflagging pursuit of being en vogue, to subject themselves to various forms of self-mortification. “I have put into the world such regulations and customs that life itself, as regards the body and the soul, is more dead than alive; so that with perfect truth this century might be called the century of death.”¹⁷ Such an argument seems even more relevant today than it did in the nineteenth century, when we have gone beyond simple corsets and high collars to liposuction, botox, blepharoplasty, and myriad other forms of plastic surgery.¹⁸

But, if Leopardi’s *Short Moral Works* is considered a pessimistic book, it is because he emphasizes that life requires figuring out how to deal with the real fact of suffering, and, in so doing, he presents us views of time and history that allow for active engagement with the world by stopping to recognize what is best in humanity. In this respect, he has less in common with pessimists like Rousseau and Schopenhauer, who call for forms of resignation, and is more akin to thinkers like Camus, who took the absurd as a jumping off point for the emancipation of humanity. The utility of Leopardi lies in his emphasis on the constraints of temporality, for never have members of the human race, across the entire planet, felt that time was running out in quite the way we do now. Now that we have an epoch named for the destruction

17 Giacomo Leopardi, *The Moral Essays* 52–53. “... ho messo nel mondo tali ordini a tali costumi, che la vita stessa, così per rispetto del corpo come dell’animo, è più morta che viva; tanto che questo secolo si può dire con verità che sia proprio il secolo della morte.” Giacomo Leopardi, *Opere Morali* 25–26.

18 A contemporary trend that exemplifies this, and other disturbing issues, is the rise in breast reduction surgery for obese teenage boys in the United States. See, for example, Alex Kuczynski, “More boys seek out breast-reduction surgery,” *The New York Times* (Early ed. 24 Jun 2007) or Adam Voiland, “Boys who grow breasts,” *U.S. News & World Report* (19 Sep 2007).

we have wrought. And yet, we insist on the march of historical progress, on endless growth, on increase, in population, in material goods, in luxury.

In *Rage and Time*, however, Sloterdijk attempts to turn to something a bit more overtly political, though still grounded in considerations of affect. Here he considers the role of specific affects in politics, in particular the Homeric and Platonic thymos [Gr. “spiritedness”], which involves the human desire for recognition (beginning with how Hegel conceives it), juxtaposed to the psycho-analytical emphasis on eros. Sloterdijk extends the concept of the thymotic into “anger” and “rage,” as a reactive manifestation of offended pride. “Given that the thymos that has been conditioned by civilization is the psychological location of what Hegel depicted as a striving for recognition, it becomes clear why the lack of recognition by relevant others excites rage. If one demands recognition from a specific opponent, one states a moral test.”¹⁹ Here, he is extending Francis Fukuyama’s use of thymos in *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992),²⁰ but seems to miss the neo-classical distinction between “megalothymia” and “isothymia,” between the desire to be recognized as superior to others as opposed to the desire to be seen as equal to them – the latter being Fukuyama’s usage, while Sloterdijk seems to err on the side of the former. Sloterdijk’s theory of rage is a politico-religious meditation on overcoming offended pride – and certainly the pride of people in “developing” nations has been injured for decades, and in some cases, centuries – but he hardly acknowledges that the vast majority of the planet is concerned with isothymia, with the basic human rights the philosophes attempted to establish, in the face of the megalothymia of the top socio-economic stratus. This lack is what the pessimists attempt to address, for, while Sloterdijk’s affect is anger, the pessimists’ is sympathy.

3. Re-viewing History in Light of the Global Absurd

Our consciousness of time seems to separate us from other animals and thus it is our responsibility to take time into account. While we cannot wholly abandon our sense of it because it is one of the sources, or products, of the intelligence that we possess and other animals may lack, we can attempt to step outside time in an effort to find some stability. Leopardi felt this, rejecting what he saw as the Enlightenment idea that the world has a fundamentally rational structure. Instead, he insisted that a universe that is bound by time is, by definition, continuously unstable. For Leopardi, time makes us suffer existentially, but humans make us suffer historically, precisely because of what the Enlightenment champions – the progress

¹⁹ Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation* (Mario Wenning, trans. New York: Columbia UP, 2010), 24. “Sofern der bürgerlich konditionierte Thymos der psychologische Sitz des von Hegel dargestellten Strebens nach Anerkennung ist, wird verständlich, warum ausbleibende Anerkennung durch relevante Andere Zorn erregt. Wer von einem bestimmten Gegenüber Anerkennung fordert, unterzieht dieses einem moralischen Test.” Peter Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit: Politisch-psychologischer Versuch* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 42-43.

²⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

of reason. Pessimists like Leopardi and Cioran recognize that our consciousness of time is what allows us to philosophize in the first place, but still contend that our time-bound status is the biggest threat to our satisfaction with our material lives. Attempting to understand our past and possible futures leads to emotional and existential suffering that far exceeds any physical pain we may endure. We cannot escape the knowledge that our time on Earth, and that of every other creature, is limited, and that we are powerless to change that. Since these facts are almost beyond our ability to comprehend, we often resort to metaphor to understand them and Leopardi and Cioran use both pagan and Christian imagery to explain our reality and critique those whom they see as exacerbating the problem.

Cioran begins *La Chute dans le Temps* [*The Fall into Time*] (1964) by discussing our inability to endure happiness, beginning with Adam in the Garden of Eden: "What else is to be expected of a career that began by an infringement of wisdom, by an infidelity to the *gift of ignorance* our Creator had bestowed on us? Cast by knowledge into time, we were thereby endowed with a destiny. For destiny exists only outside Paradise."²¹ This Promethean betrayal led to the conception of historical narrative that is now the crutch we use to limp through progress, for, as he writes in *A Short History of Decay*, "History is irony on the move."²² And yet, as he shows a few pages on, we should feel liberated by the meaninglessness of history:

That History has not meaning is what should delight our hearts. Should we be tormenting ourselves for a happy solution to process, for a final festival paid for by nothing but our sweat, our disasters? for future idiots exulting over our labors, frolicking on our ashes? The vision of a paradisiac conclusion transcends, in its absurdity, the worst divagations of hope. All we can offer in excuse for Time is that in it we find some moments more profitable than others, accidents without consequence in an intolerable monotony of perplexities. The universe begins and ends with each individual, whether he be Shakespeare or Hodge, for each individual experiences his merit or his nullity *in the absolute*....²³

21 E. M. Cioran, *The Fall into Time*, Richard Howard, trans. (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1970) 35-36. Translator's emphasis. "Qu'attendre d'autre d'une carrière commencée par une infraction à la sagesse, par une infidélité au don d'ignorance que le Créateur nous avait dispensé? Précipités par le savoir dans le temps, nous fûmes du même coup dotés d'un destin. Car il n'y a de destin qu'en dehors du paradis" E. M. Cioran, *Œuvres* 1072.

22 E. M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay* 147-48. "L'histoire est l'ironie en marche." E. M. Cioran, *Œuvres* 708.

23 E. M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay* 148-149. "Que l'Histoire n'ait aucun sens, voilà de quoi nous réjouir. Nous tourmenterions-nous pour une résolution heureuse du devenir, pour une fête finale dont nos sueurs et nos désastres feraient seuls les frais? pour d'idiots futurs exultant sur nos peines, gambadant sur nos cendres? La vision d'un achèvement paradisiaque dépasse, en son absurdité, les pires divagations de l'espoir. Tout ce que l'on surait prétexter à l'excuse du Temps, c'est que l'on y trouve des moments plus profitables que d'autres, accidents sans conséquence dans une intolérable monotonie de perplexités. L'univers commence et finit avec chaque individu, fût-il Shakespeare ou Gros-Jean; car chaque individu vit dans l'absolu son mérite ou sa nullité..." E. M. Cioran, *Œuvres* 709.

Indeed, it does seem, most of the time, that human beings do not learn from their own histories. They are forgotten altogether or, at least, the circumstances surrounding them are, as well as what the stakes and outcomes were; what lessons we might glean from them do not fundamentally change our courses of action. Rather, we resort to habits that originate in some of the oldest, most primal, parts of the brain. We resort to fight or flight rather than to the neurally newer, deliberative mechanisms for which history could really teach us something. For Cioran, having fallen in time, human beings do not flourish, but we do find a way to survive. He feels that the process of this fall and our adjustment to it is what history actually is.²⁴

By the same token, Cioran fears that if we only focus on futures that are never actualized in the here and now, our lives will have no merit. To focus only on the future is to fall into what he calls the “idolatry of tomorrow,”²⁵ it is to ignore today in favor of an imaginary future. If we can avoid this idolatry of the future, though, in addition to avoiding merely reacting to history, we will have agency. We are then liberated from time, to some degree, and can act. And, if we can do so presently, we can avoid determining the even more challenging present in which future generations are likely to live. The fact that the future is indeterminate is not a problem for Cioran; in fact, it is the very source of our liberation; it is what enables us to show future generations our compassion for them. The open vista ahead of us is not a horrible circumstance to be endured, but a golden opportunity that we should not squander. Cioran warns, though, toward the very end of *The Fall into Time*, that while this form of existence trapped in time is hellish, we must be careful not to fall again, out of time, and thus history – “dans l’absolu de la stagnation, où le verbe lui-même s’enlise” [in the absolute of stagnation where the Word (verb) itself bogs down] – by not using our consciousness of time to act ethically.²⁶

What makes Cioran fascinating and constructive is the fact that he sees that our absurd condition shows that every moment is both valueless and valuable. We can make the choice, although the situation is not either/or; moments can be both, and indeed have to be in order for us to act with detachment from our own personal gain. By turns, Cioran denounces the fashionable post-war Western interest in Buddhism and Hinduism, and yet he iterates its focus on living in the moment as a way of equalizing the fall into time. For Cioran, we sort of remember our animal past and thus are nostalgic for it, but the unity of human beings and their desires cannot exist. This is why he is so critical of the Asian spirituality vogue of the 1950s. To him, unity of *Atman and Brahman* – of the small individual soul and the larger absolute one, which was a possibility for his pessimist forefather Schopenhauer – is impossible in our lived experience precisely because of our in-

24 E. M. Cioran, *The Fall into Time* 180. E. M. Cioran, *Œuvres* 1156.

25 E. M. Cioran, *The Fall into Time* 47. E. M. Cioran, *Œuvres* 1079.

26 E. M. Cioran, *The Fall into Time* 181. E. M. Cioran, *Œuvres* 1156.

ability to totally escape the crushing awareness of time. Yet, like Schopenhauer, he advocates being “uncivilized,” that is to say not grasping to obtain material things but attempting to let them go. Rather than Sloterdijk’s emphasis on the nefarious rise of secularism, Cioran felt that human beings’ cruel fall into time was the primary problem of human consciousness, maintaining that we are divided between our baser instincts and our consciousness of the passage of years. This contradiction is what Cioran (as well as Camus) feels is absurd about the human condition. We are working with brain hardware that predates our contemporary problems by millennia, yet we are aware of our containment in time in ways that eat at our souls. Instead of bucking against this contradiction, though, he thinks that we should just recognize our limitations and rest within them, in what he calls “*a state of non-suicide*.”²⁷

Conversely, Sloterdijk doesn’t address much of *Rage and Time* to actual questions of time. While the use of the word in the title nods to Heidegger, it is not the primary topic of conversation; instead, the time element here really pertains to a provincial nostalgia. His work consistently takes ancient Greece as his starting point, and it lingers over Renaissance art for hundreds of pages in *Spheres*. And while there are references to artifacts beyond Europe’s shores, they are rarely considered in a wider context of cultural pluralism. Even his reference in the introduction to the *Iliad* (760-710 B.C.) as the first text of Western civilization is dated at this point, thanks to the archeological discovery of older texts such as *Gilgamesh* (c. 2100 B.C.), which actually might have been a more interesting example of the power of the thymotic in political life (particularly as it connects to the Islam Sloterdijk explores at the book’s end). Like the Orientalist neo-Hellenists inspired by the eighteenth-century art historian and archeologist Johan Joachim Winckelmann, he makes essentialist arguments, like that we wish that we had war heroes to worship like the ancient Greeks did and like the few remaining groups today in “the esoteric highlands,” whom we envy for their “authenticity.”²⁸ Such passages do not instill the reader with confidence that Sloterdijk is capable of thinking outside decidedly Eurocentric paradigms.

His cynicism resurfaces toward the beginning of his final chapter, on mass consumer culture, in which he argues that rage today leads to nothing.²⁹ “There is hardly any constructive use of psychopolitically relevant affects. *Thymos* fields do not manage to stabilize themselves. It seems that rage does not want to continue to learn. It does not reach the level of knowledge, and knowledge does not reach it.”³⁰ Though Sloterdijk is coming at sociopolitical issues from the angle of affect,

27 E. M. Cioran, *A Short History of Decay* 19. Translator’s emphasis. “un état de non-suicide,” E. M. Cioran, *Œuvres* 596.

28 Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time* 5. Peter Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit* 15.

29 Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time* 183. Peter Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit* 282.

30 Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time* 184. “Doch bleibt die Aufmerksamkeit auf diese Energien mäßig, konstruktive Verwertungen der psychopolitisch relevanten Affekte sind kaum zu beobachten – den *Thymos*-Feldern gelingt es nicht, sich zu stabilisieren. Der Zorn will,

here he seems somewhat in line with Cioran and Leopardi, although again, he is more cynic than pessimist. For them, history does not fundamentally change the game, it does not get human beings to learn from their mistakes. For Sloterdijk, the thymotic – in the form of what he calls “vagabond dissidence quantities”³¹ or “the misanthropic international”³² – does not lead us to learn from our mistakes either. There may have been the Arab Spring and the Occupy Movement, but we are still discussing Iran’s nuclear program and Wall Street has hardly been reined in at all. And yet, Sloterdijk is resigned to the optimism that somehow things will get better, despite his own arguments to the contrary. He writes,

With regard to the achievement of the essentially ahistorical or purely futuristic capitalist system, it needs to be stated that it did bring about a historicity of a special kind. Its general tendency was made mystical with the singular concept of ‘progress.’ This does not really change the ironic relationship between capitalism and the past. The entrepreneurially run world needs the past basically only to leave it behind.³³

It is interesting that here Sloterdijk finds capitalism itself to have done exactly what Cioran warned: it discards the past and focuses on an unattainable future. Sloterdijk finds a certain “historicity” in this, that it does mark a moment in the history of the world, but one wonders whether human beings will learn anything from capitalism’s errors if or when the edifice collapses. He follows this by repeating his central point, that

in the present, no movements and parties are visible that could once again take on the functions of a world bank for the utopian-prophetic use of thymotic impulses. In the absence of a successful collection point of rage with a perspective on what needs to be done, we are thus at the same time missing the theoretical standpoint from which consultations concerning truly global matters could be carried out.³⁴

scheint es, nicht mehr lernen. Er findet nicht zur Einsicht, und die Einsicht findet ihn nicht.” Peter Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit* 283.

31 Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time* 183. Peter Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit* 282.

32 Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time* 203. Peter Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit* 315.

33 Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time* 197. “Im Blick auf diese Leistung ist zu konstatieren, daß das prinzipiell ahistorisch beziehungsweise rein futurisch verfaßte kapitalistische System doch eine Geschichtlichkeit eigener Art hervorgebracht hat. Deren Tendenz wurde in der Anfangsphase des Spiels mit dem Singularbegriff »Fortschritt« mystifiziert. Dies ändert wenig am ironischen Verhältnis des Kapitalismus zu vergangenen Zeiten. Die unternehmerisch bewegte Welt braucht die Vergangenheit im Grunde nur noch, um sie hinter sich zu lassen.” Peter Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit* 304.

34 Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time* 203-204. “Es sind im Horizont der Gegenwart keine Bewegungen und Parteien sichtbar, denen erneut die Funktionen einer Weltbank für die utopische-prophetische Verwertung thymotischer Regungen zufallen könnte. Mangels einer operativ erfolgreichen Zornsammelstelle mit einer verbindlichen Was-tun?-Perspektive fehlt es zugleich an den Theorie-Standpunkten, von denen aus Lagebesprechungen über wahrhaft globale Angelegenheiten stattfinden könnten.” Peter Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit* 315.

In this passage, we hear again echoes of the '60s countercultural Sloterdijk, romantically invoking the "utopian-prophetic use of thymotic impulses." While I believe I understand his point, he takes little notice of institutions that do attempt to tease out solutions to pressing global problems – the International Criminal Court, the World Trade Organization, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – and for which figures such as Australian moral philosopher Peter Singer have proposed reforms.³⁵

In the conclusion to *Rage and Time*, "Beyond Resentment," though, Sloterdijk writes, "under conditions of globalization no politics of balancing suffering on a large scale is possible that is built on holding past injustices against someone, no matter if it is codified by redemptive, social-messianic, or democratic-messianic ideologies."³⁶ But the issue here is that improving on the inequalities of globalization is not predicated on punishing past injustices so much as it is on putting in place limits that make such injustices impossible in the first place. This is what writer-activists like Singer, Vandana Shiva, Bill McKibben, Noam Chomsky, and many others advocate for. You can execute dictators after they have been responsible for atrocities, but it is better to establish functioning democracies that disallow their rise to power in the first place, and to keep the priorities of multinational corporations from undermining such processes.

Conclusion: The Imperatives of Realism

Such limitations speak to the issue that Leopardi's pessimist contemporary, Schopenhauer, addresses in the "Antimoral Incentives" section of his "Preisschrift über die Grundlage der Moral" ["Prize Essay on the Basis of Morals"] (1840): "Egoism by its nature is boundless: the human wills unconditionally to preserve his existence; wills it unconditionally free of pains, among which are included all want and privation; wills the greatest possible amount of well-being, and wills every pleasure of which he is capable, even seeks wherever possible to develop new capacities for pleasure."³⁷ That is to say, morality is to some degree, like it or not, based on human

35 Peter Singer, *One World: The Ethics of Globalization* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2004), among other works.

36 Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time* 228. "In der globalisierten Situation ist keine Politik des Leidensausgleichs im Großen mehr möglich, die auf dem Nachtragen von vergangenem Unrecht aufbaut, unter welchen welterlöserisch, sozialmessianisch oder demokratiemessianisch codierten Verbrämungen auch immer." Peter Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit* 354.

37 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics* (David E. Cartwright and Edward E. Erdmann, trans. Oxford, UK: Oxford UP, 2010), 202. "Der Egoismus ist seiner Natur nach grenzenlos: der Mensch will unbedingt sein Dasein erhalten, will es von Schmerzen, zu denen auch aller Mangel und [jede] Entbehrung gehört, unbedingt frei, will die größtmögliche Summe von Wohlsein und will jeden Genuß, zu dem er fähig ist, ja sucht wo möglich noch neue Fähigkeiten zum Genusse in sich zu entwickeln." Arthur Schopenhauer, *Sämtliche Werke* (5 Bdn. Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1972), 3:727.

nature, which is selfish. An early Indophile, Schopenhauer's emphasis on overcoming selfish desire has a distinctly Orientalist ring.³⁸ But while Schopenhauer didn't see time as nearly as big a problem as Cioran, for the latter the impact of the fall into time on our morality comes to the same thing: egoism. Egoism is caused by awareness of time and results in our barbarous history. After World War II, Cioran moved into a pessimistic mode that advocated for resignation and withdrawal, but as Dienstag points out, "whereas Schopenhauer predicated the idea of withdrawal or resignation from life on the claim that time-consciousness was something fundamentally unreal and that, in approaching nirvana, we actually approach true knowledge, Cioran does not comfort himself with the idea of an alternate reality or a compensatory knowledge."³⁹ This is certainly true, but even Schopenhauer found late in life that he was interested in the issue of happiness and, like Cioran after him, searches for an art of living life as painlessly as possible.⁴⁰ This is found in Leopardi, as well, for whom the art of living involves setting aside our previous worldviews and their related pursuits, so that, by being liberated by them, we may be fortified to live our short lives in a more fulfilling way. Yet, an art of living must still be tied to a politics.

Pessimism has been consistently criticized for being apolitical – which may stem from the fact that Schopenhauer had no faith in politics to improve human lives – but I would argue that the anti-systematic views of Schopenhauer, Leopardi, Cioran (and, for that matter, Nietzsche) can be very usefully applied to the political, alongside active politically engaged pessimists like Camus. Unsurprisingly, it is optimism that has given pessimism a bad rap. Scruton argues that,

if anything were to amplify pessimism and deprive it of its cheerful aspect, it would be the response of the optimists themselves, who are unable to relinquish their illusions. Rather than retrace their steps to discover the fallacies that have engendered their beliefs, the optimists will attack their critics, often with a venom that is hard to endure. Or they will return to their schemes and theories with a renewed enthusiasm, saying that they have not gone far enough, that what is needed is more planning, more liberation, more progress – and more executions.⁴¹

38 For a more in-depth look at this, see Robert Cowan, "Schopenhauer's Justification for Good," *The Indo-German Identification: Reconciling South Asian Origins and European Destinies, 1765–1885* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2010), 142–161.

39 Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism* 145.

40 See Schopenhauer's discussion of "eudemonology" (from the Gr. *eudemonia*, meaning "happiness") in "Aphorisms on the Wisdom of Life," *Parerga and Paralipomena*, E. F. J. Payne trans., 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974) 1:313; *Sämtliche Werke*, 4:375.

41 Roger Scruton, *The Uses of Pessimism and the Dangers of False Hope* 167.

Certainly, this is what we see, for example, in the revolving door of politicians who run regulatory agencies that are meant to regulate the very industries that form those politicians' largest constituencies. Whether they recognize "the fallacies that have engendered their beliefs" or not, too much money is at stake – whole giant industries, not to mention their political careers – for them to reverse course. Hence the need for democratically agreed-upon, enforceable, and enforced limits.

Sloterdijk himself has tacitly espoused a philosophy of *resignation to optimism* from the very start of his career. There is a necessary tension between theory and praxis, between principle and realism, and it is dangerous to abandon the sober latter for the nombrilistic former. This is something that some earlier thinkers such as Hobbes and Kant already seemed to know, but has been lost on Sloterdijk. If we want to actually survive as a species without enduring catastrophic setbacks, like a sudden decrease in global population during which the poorest will suffer first and most, we will have to willingly burst our romantic bubbles, set aside our 3,000-page meditations on art, and get down to the dirty work of pragmatic, democratic action: establish and enforce limitations on corruption, on business, on politics, which I realize is easier said than done. But, despite their own forms of resignation, the worldviews of Cioran and Leopardi are more conducive to that task than the irresponsible optimism of Sloterdijk because they are more realistic about the limitations of human beings' place in the universe. This is what realism requires.

In that vein, Rage Against the Machine's Zack De la Rocha sings, "Yes, I know my enemies. They're the teachers who taught me to fight me – compromise, conformity, assimilation, submission, ignorance, hypocrisy, brutality, the elite – all of which are American dreams."⁴² De la Rocha is referring to the lives of Blacks and Latinos in the United States but the import of his statement applies globally, to the five or six billion people who are not among the world's most affluent, who have no say in the decisions that affect them, the "precariat" who most profoundly experience the global absurd and have to pay back debts they didn't incur. Thus, De la Rocha has much in common with the strain of Afro-Pessimism that has developed since the late 1980s (led by figures like George B. N. Ayittey, Robert H. Jackson, and Carl G. Rosberg), which emphasizes not that sub-Saharan Africa is incapable of sustainable development and self-rule, but that the system of kleptocratic local governments and the loans from Western banks that fund them needs to be dismantled. Thus, the new home of constructive pessimism lies, to some degree, outside North Atlantic countries. Hopefully it can have a strong impact on the roots of the problem in Europe and the United States.

42 Rage Against the Machine. "Know Your Enemy." *Rage Against the Machine*. CD. Epic Records, 1992.0

Looking back at pessimism's antecedents, though, despite the fact that they're European, is needed. Leopardi and Cioran were raging against the idea that time is a machine that we are caught in, that causes us to act in mechanized fashions indicative of the specific chronotopes in which we live, with their respective dysfunctional mores. In Leopardi's "Proposta di Premi fatta dall'Accademia dei Sillografi" [Proposal for Prizes from the Academy of Sillographers], he satirically envisions various machines to improve human lives, emphasizing the need for machines that establish friendship, make people magnanimous, and ensure marital bliss (certainly prizes that one imagines would appeal to Berlant!) But, if we need another new machine, we need a time machine – a machine that can help us think ahistorically, a machine to help us escape our consciousness of time and focus on the ethics of here and now. Then, we can avoid discarding the past, looking to an unrealistic future, or being cynically resigned to the present state of affairs.