

Cynicism Then and Now

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Abstract: Ancient cynicism was a moralistic school of ascetic and anti-materialistic gadflies and critics. Modern cynicism is generally understood as amoral, selfish, and manipulative. This article explores the change in meaning that led from one to the other, and what each kind of cynicism could mean for contemporary life. It is very unlikely that most people would ever adopt the values and ways of the ancient cynics, but there may still be something to be gained from the few who might engage in this mode of life: possibly more environmentalism, and if nothing else, more humor in our lives. Modern cynicism may have little of positive value to contribute to life and politics, although at least it undermines the self-righteous moralists. In any case, it is worth understanding in order to cope with it. Along the way, we learn that since Diogenes of Sinope a wide variety of thinkers from Socrates, Machiavelli, and Spinoza through Rousseau and Nietzsche to Wittgenstein have been credited with cynicism. That suggests that it may be more important to our intellectual life than many of us realize.

Ancient and modern cynicism seem to be two very different things. Ancient cynicism was the school attributed to Antisthenes (446–366 BC) and Diogenes of Sinope (404–323 BC). It was a highly moralistic school, even to the point of rejecting all other parts of philosophy in the name of ethics. Modern cynicism, by contrast, is generally taken to be immoral, selfish, manipulative, and hypocritical. How did the meaning of the concept change into its opposite? And how could recovery of the ancient meaning help us with modern problems?

1. The ancient tradition

In order to see how the concept changed, we must have a picture of the original version. Antisthenes was an itinerant philosopher who needed no personal property but a staff, a cloak, and carrying-bag or wallet which could hold a few necessities like a piece of dried bread. His simple and ascetic lifestyle gave him the moral high ground from which to criticize others for their material-

ism and selfishness.¹ He provided the cynics with a genealogy by claiming to adopt the cynic way of life from Socrates's hardihood and disregard of feeling, and asserting that he got the idea that pain is a good thing from Heracles and Cyrus (DL VI 5).

Diogenes of Sinope became the most famous model cynic. Many sources contain anecdotes about him. Perhaps the most famous is the occasion when Alexander the Great visited him and offered to do him a favor. "Get out of my sunlight!" he answered. The point was that he lived so modestly and independently that he needed nothing from Alexander. He is also famous for walking around with a lamp in daylight, saying "I'm looking for an honest man" (DL VI 43). He lived in a tub or a barrel, and performed all of his natural functions in public. Because of this he was called a "dog," and proudly adopted the name, which is *kyon* in ancient Greek, and the source of the word "cynic."²

This was not an abstract, intellectualized, philosophical moralism, but a moralism of practice. Diogenes attacked materialism and urged a sort of "back to nature" movement. He was a critic of political establishments whose ideas verged on anarchism. He spoke as he pleased (Greek *parrhesia*), and claimed independence (*autarkeia*) precisely because he cultivated self-denial (*askesis*).³ He was known for the slogan "deface the coinage!," a metaphor for rejection of conventional social customs and institutions. Notice that on this account Diogenes was not a liar or manipulative. He was selfish in a way, but not at the expense of others. He was the very opposite of a politician: he did not hold any office.

Less familiar are the later cynics such as Monimus (4th c. BC); Onesicritus (fl. 330 BC); Menippus, who wrote satires and lent his name to what is known as Menippean satire; and Menedemus. Unlike most other schools of ancient philosophy, there was a woman cynic, Hipparchia (c. 300 BC), who lived in public with her husband, the cynic Crates (fl. 326 BC).

We have only a handful of substantial sources about ancient cynicism. The groundwork is laid in Book VI of Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Philosophers* (DL VI 2-109). From him we have many of the anecdotes of Diogenes as a strident critic of almost everything and everyone around him.

We owe to the Roman-Syrian writer Lucian (ca. 120-190 AD) exposure of the fact that – as perhaps with all self-proclaimed moralists– there may have been more fake or phony cynics than real cynics. His dialogue on Peregrinus Proteus makes fun of a hypocritical and pretended cynic who announces his

¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R.D. Hicks, 2 vols., Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1925, vol. 2, Book VI, p. 15 [hereafter cited as DLVI 15]. See L. Navia, *Antisthenes of Athens: Setting the World Aright*, Westport: Greenwood, 2001.

² See C. García Gual, *La Secta del Perro*, Madrid: Alianza, 1987; L. Nava, *Diogenes the Cynic*, Amherst: Humanity Books, 2005; W. Desmond, *Cynics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

³ See M.-O. Goulet-Cazé, *L'ascèse cynique*, Paris: Vrin, 1986.

own suicide expecting to be restrained from going through with it, but then is forced to do it in order to save face. Ironically, “face” would be of no importance to a real cynic. Another of Lucian’s dialogues, “Demonax,” has been read as the story of the ideal cynic, but it has also been read as a subtle put-down. Lucian reports that Demonax makes fun of effeminates, the weak, mourners, and cripples.⁴ This may be cynical critical humor, but to modern tastes it is picking on the weak.⁵ Some of Lucian’s humorous dialogues have sympathetic cynics, but only “The Cynic” (*Kynikos*) seems to be a serious portrayal of good cynics, and for that reason it is often assigned to Pseudo-Lucian.⁶

Perhaps the best-known moral philosopher to transmit cynical teachings was Epictetus (ca. 55–ca. 135 A.D.). He left us a stoicized Diogenes in his *Discourses*, and has been described as the most cynic of the stoics,⁷ but he could just as well be described as the most stoic of the cynics. It is important to realize that cynicism can blend over into stoicism; after all, the founder of Stoicism, Zeno, was a student of the cynic, Crates. Our labels for the schools are, after all, no more than labels for dynamic families of ideas.

In chapter 21 of Book 3 of his *Discourses*, Epictetus situates Diogenes in the company of Socrates and Zeno:

God counseled Socrates to take the office of examining and confuting men, Diogenes the office of rebuking men in a kingly manner, and Zeno that of instructing men and laying down doctrines.⁸

Chapter 22 of Book 3 is titled “On the Calling of a Cynic.” Two features of the foregoing sentence are reiterated. One is that right away, he subsumes cynicism under religion by asserting that a true cynic must seek guidance from God and cannot do it alone (p. 133). The other is that the cynic is described several times as a kind of king; also as a father (pp. 157–59). But his kingship is not official and formal, it is as an example: he is a king in spirit. This is the highest form of politics, Epictetus observes (p. 161).

Cynic leadership is not just ascetic behavior, begging for a living, and criticizing people (p. 135). Rather, it is first and foremost a matter of self-discipline. One must wipe out desire and “feel no anger, no rage, no envy, no pity” (p. 135). One must have nothing to hide. One must think of oneself

⁴ *Lucian*, trans. A. Harmon, Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1913, vol. 1, pp. 141–173.

⁵ D. Glidden, “Review of R. Bracht Branham and M.-O. Goulet-Cazé, eds., *The Cynics*,” *Ancient Philosophy*, 18 (1998), pp. 440–458, p. 452.

⁶ *Lucian*, trans. M. D. Macleod, Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1967, vol. 8, p. 379.

⁷ R. Voitle, *The Third Earl of Shaftesbury: 1671–1713*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984, p. 149. See also A. A. Long, *Epictetus*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

⁸ Epictetus, *The Discourses*, 2 vols., Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1925–28, Book 3, p. 129.

as a messenger from God to men, showing them the true nature of good and evil. Possessions, and even life itself, are not intrinsically good: it is better to be dead than to be a bad man. Many a rich man is enslaved by his possessions. But Diogenes is free because his mind his free (p. 147).

If there is any model in Epictetus for modern times, it is the model of the self-disciplined ascetic reformer, out to rebuke men for their failings and to try to set them straight. He will not succeed if he is tied down by family duties, so he must not be married (pp. 155-59). He must rule by setting an example and challenging others to live like him. Since the stoic cynic is burdened by stoic commitments that are not widely attractive in contemporary times, it is hard to believe that Epictetus's cynic "king" will have many followers.

If Diogenes's cynicism and Epictetus's asceticism are too radical for some, the cynical tradition also offers a more moderate alternative. There is a less radical, gentler version of Diogenes. The orator Dio Chrysostom (Dio of Prusa) (40-112 A.D.) lived as a cynic for part of his life, and has sympathetic portraits of Diogenes in many of his discourses.⁹ Dio's version of Diogenes's cynicism is moralistic: anti-war, ascetic, anti-materialist, anti-glory. But he does not throw off all civility and one can construct a somewhat more palatable version of cynicism from his writings.

In his fourth discourse "On Kingship," Dio describes Diogenes's encounter with Alexander the Great.¹⁰ He observes that it reveals not only what Diogenes was trying to say, but what kind of man Alexander was. Alexander appreciates the fact that Diogenes is one of very few men who are not enslaved by luxury, money, and pleasure (p. 171) and admires his boldness (p. 175). What the great king does not realize is how much he himself is enslaved to glory, and Diogenes tells him he is his own bitterest foe (p. 195). He is too dependent on others for his glory, which means he is enslaved to their opinions (p. 225). Diogenes points out that real kingship is not just a matter of authority, but of substance. He leaves room for a positive role for kings: he is not against the

man who, having managed his own life admirably, endeavors by the persuasion of speech combined with good will and a sense of justice to train and direct a great multitude of men and to lead them to better things. (p. 227).

This could even be understood as a description of democratic leadership in modern societies.

⁹ Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses*, 5 vols., Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1932-51, esp. vol. 1, the fourth discourse "On Kingship," "Diogenes, or On Tyranny," "Diogenes, or On Virtue," "Diogenes, or The Isthmian," "Diogenes, or On Servants."

¹⁰ Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses*, vol. 1, pp. 169-233.

Dio's "Euboean Discourse" may be the first extended case for environmentalist back-to-nature living.¹¹ The healthy outdoor life of the hunter may not be for everybody, but it is possible for some. Dio's discourse on "Diogenes, or On Tyranny" complains that humans do not use their intelligence to promote courage or justice, but mostly to procure pleasure (p. 265). He also demonstrates that the lower conditions of life are safer than the higher ranks: tyrants must live in fear, while Diogenes can travel anywhere because he is seen as neither a threat nor worth robbing (p. 281). Minding your own business, including taking care of your own sexual needs rather than kidnapping a Helen and starting a war, gives you independence.

In "Diogenes, or On Virtue" Dio recruits Hercules to the canon of cynic heroes by describing his simple clothing, his ability to sleep on the ground and to resist public opinion, and his uncomplaining labors for humankind. His Diogenes tries to convince spectators at the Isthmian games that the fights against hardship on the one hand and pleasure on the other are more important than athletic contests. Personal self-control and fortitude are better than competition between people. This latter point of view is expanded in "Diogenes, or the Isthmian," where Diogenes reduces a once-proud athlete to humility. Finally, Dio's discourse "Diogenes, or on Servants" teaches self-reliance as an alternative to dependence on servants, property, or appeals to the gods. The upshot of Dio's cynical discourses may still be a cynicism too radical for most, but may be recognizable as the widely-praised if not always widely followed cultural pattern of self-control and self-denial in pursuit of independence and tranquility.

2. The modern tradition

Cynicism was never really lost after ancient times, and many of our sources were available in late antiquity and the medieval period.¹² The materi-

¹¹ Dio Chrysostom, *Discourses*, vol. 1, pp. 285-373. P. Sloterdijk, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983 [*Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. M. Eldred, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987], writes that "Everything suggests that Diogenes of Sinope should be admitted to the Ancestral Gallery of Ecological Consciousness" (p. 151). See also W. Desmond, *The Greek Praise of Poverty: Origins of Ancient Cynicism*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006.

¹² H. Niehues-Pröbsting, *Der Kynismus des Diogenes und der Begriff des Zynismus*, Munich: Fink, 1979, 2nd. ed., 1988, traces the history of cynic ideas down to the Renaissance and early modern period. N. Largier, *Diogenes der Kyniker: Exempel, Erzählung, Geschichte in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit. Mit einem Essay zur Figur des Diogenes zwischen Kynismus, Narrentum und postmoderner Kritik*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1997, reprints 75 texts of cynical ideas and sayings from Valerius Maximus sometime after 31 AD through medieval, Renaissance, and early modern times to

als were developed substantially in the Renaissance. Erasmus of Rotterdam included some 350 cynical sayings in his *Apophthegmata*.¹³ Rabelais revelled in Menippean satire. Montaigne's friend Étienne de la Boétie adopted cynic methods of teaching such as invective, irony, word-play, and paradoxes to provoke thought and to castigate the lazy.¹⁴ Montaigne mentioned or quoted Antisthenes 14 times, Diogenes 18 times, and Crates 8 times in his *Essays*.¹⁵ It has been customary to debate whether Montaigne passed through stages as a skeptic, a stoic, and an Epicurean; it is curious that so little has been said about his cynicism, despite so many references to cynics.¹⁶

As an indicator of the resurgence of ancient cynicism in the history of modern philosophy, Michel Foucault made the ancient cynics one of the chief topics of his last lectures at Berkeley and Paris, published as *Fearless Speech* and *Le courage de la vérité*.¹⁷ Setting out to find a genealogy of political activism and the critical tradition in the West, he concludes rather soberly that we have no good way of distinguishing the real truth-speakers from the chatterers, the flatterers, the bad, the immoral, the self-deluded, and the ignorant.¹⁸ The cynics are part of his self-subverting genealogy.

This brings us to the point that contemporary European languages do not use the word "cynic" to describe the truth-speakers as much as to label the flatterers, the manipulative, and the hypocritical. How did the word get transferred to mean the opposite of the original meaning?

David Mazella has given us an account of the change in meaning from the ancient tradition to modern cynicism in English culture, starting as early as Shakespeare but dating the main transition to the end of the eighteenth century

Christian Wernicke in 1701. For recent work recovering aspects of the tradition, see J. Laursen, "Scepticism et cynisme dans l'oeuvre de Pierre de Valence," *Philosophiques*, 35 (2008), pp. 187-206; Id., "Humanism vs. Cynicism: Cosmopolitan Culture and National Identity in Eighteenth-Century Denmark," in K. Haakonssen and H. Horstbøll (eds.), *Northern Antiquities and National Identities: Perceptions of Denmark and the North in the Eighteenth Century*, Copenhagen: Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 2008, pp. 145-162, 336-339; Id., "John Upton's 'Critical Liberty,'" *Annals of Scholarship*, (forthcoming). For a wide-ranging survey by many scholars, see R. Bracht Branham and M.-O. Goulet-Cazé (eds.), *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

¹³ M. Clément, "Abrutis, vous pouvez cesser de l'être": Le *Discours de la servitude volontaire* et la pédagogie cynique," *Libertinage et philosophie au XVIIe siècle*, 7 (2003), p. 110.

¹⁴ Clément, "Abrutis, vous pouvez cesser," pp. 105-119.

¹⁵ See M. Clément, *Le cynisme à la Renaissance. D'Erasmus à Montaigne*, Geneva: Droz, 2005, ch. 8.

¹⁶ But see Clément, *Le cynisme à la Renaissance* and A. Comte-Sponville, *Valeur et vérité. Études cyniques*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994, ch. 3: "Montaigne cynique?"

¹⁷ M. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, Los Angeles: Semiotexte, 2001; Id., *Le courage de la vérité*, Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2009.

¹⁸ See J. Laursen, "Review of Foucault, *Fearless Speech*," *Perspectives on Politics*, 1 (2003), pp. 589-590.

and beginning of the nineteenth.¹⁹ When Edmund Burke called Rousseau a cynic and accused him of being a hypocrite and a phony, he was following in the footsteps of Lucian's exposure of fake cynics who did not act according to their own ideals (pp. 143 ff.). But the fact that Rousseau was arguably a failed and inadequate cynic was eventually lost amidst a transfer of the chief meaning of the word from the original strict moralists to the hypocritical phony moralists. An entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for 1814 labels the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes a cynic because he assumes people are selfish and immoral behind their pretensions to high-minded reasons for what they do (p. 15). This became the more common usage of the word.

Mazella asserts that knowledge of this genealogy will somehow help us get "the hard work of political persuasion restarted" in order to create "truly democratic" "meaningful change" and "progressive social change" (pp. 4-6). This is intended as an answer to those who think that cynicism implies quietism, fatalism, or a withdrawal from politics. But it may be a misunderstanding, however well intended, of ancient cynicism, which may indeed be limited to personal asceticism and criticism of authority, without a progressive program. One can imagine how Diogenes would have responded to such pious intentions: with his stick, or with a vulgar motion. If the goal is "true democracy," it is possible that neither ancient nor modern cynicism are going to be very helpful.

Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* gave the newer meaning a different genealogy: he traced its rise to Frederick the Great, Otto von Bismarck, and the Weimar republic in early twentieth-century Germany.²⁰ He defined cynicism as "enlightened false consciousness," which is a paradox because strictly speaking it is a contradiction in terms (p. 5). His point is that even when we recognize the truth and understand that we are living according to a false consciousness, we go on doing it (e.g. p. 102). In Weimar Germany, Sloterdijk argues, everybody was a cynic in the modern sense: politicians, religious leaders, the military, and even doctors. They were cowardly, selfish, manipulative, and exploitative, and they knew it. This sort of cynicism was exposed every day in the newspapers, but such publicity had no practical effect.

Sloterdijk admires ancient cynicism:

the appearance of Diogenes marks the most dramatic moment in the process of truth of early European philosophy. (p. 102).

¹⁹ D. Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007.

²⁰ "The best [literary] authors were active even at that time as phenomenologists of cynicism [...] To the present day, they maintain a lead in this area over professional philosophy": Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, p. 477.

Sloterdijk's solution to pervasive modern cynicism is a return to this ancient cynicism, which he spelled "kynical" to distinguish it from modern cynicism. This would mean cheeky, raucous laughter in the face of powerful hypocrites, satirical resistance to rigged games, and plebeian street philosophy against elitist Platonism.

In some situations it certainly might be healthy to laugh at the pretensions of hypocrites and tyrants. But it is hard to believe that laughter of any type is really going to solve the world's problems. Sloterdijk at times refers to his preferred kynicism as "amoral good humor" (p. 126), against the heavy-handed moralists. He also contends that his critique of cynicism is part of the solution, and has the potential for giving enlightenment a new lease of life (p. 82). But this is moralistic again. You cannot have it both ways: either ancient cynicism and our return to it are moralistic or they are amoral. As we have seen, the historical tradition was moralistic. Sloterdijk's return to it cannot be amoral and moralistic at the same time.

It also cannot be both political and anti-political effectively at the same time. Sloterdijk recognizes that Diogenes was an anti-theoretician, anti-dogmatist, and anti-scholar (p. 160). He was also the bearer of an "existential anti-politics" and "a shameless political animal" (p. 167). This is another paradox, but Diogenes is presumably showing people they are ashamed of the wrong things. He was both political by criticizing everything and everyone around him, and anti-political by refusing to take constructive political action. But at the very least, each of these undermines the other.

In France, Michel Onfray wrote a sympathetic exposition of ancient cynicism a few years after Sloterdijk.²¹ The subversive strategies of the ancient cynics such as defacing the coinage, scatological humor, hardy self-reliance, and so forth are reviewed. We do not all have to live in barrels and dress like Diogenes in order to benefit from his liberating ideology, Onfray asserts. He features Voltaire and especially Nietzsche as canonical modern cynics of the good kind, playing up the importance, among other things, of cynical humor in an otherwise too-serious public sphere.

Onfray's term for what amount to Sloterdijk's modern cynics (not his healthy kynics) is "vulgar cynics," identified as duplicitous people who use justifications such as that the end justifies the means and the necessity of sacrifice of the individual for the sake of the community in order to cover up selfish purposes. These can be found in religion, politics, the military, and among revolutionaries as well as big capitalists (curiously, no mention of cynicism among workers). Onfray's answer to all of these is, at least implicitly, a return to ancient cynicism and its freewheeling ways. In answer to the objection that society could

²¹ M. Onfray, *Cynismes. Portrait du philosophe en chien*, Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1990.

not survive if everyone was a fiercely anti-social individualist like Diogenes, he argued that it is understood that the Diogeneses will always be the exceptions, never the rule, but that does not mean they are not valuable. We are left with a sense that there may be something valuable in ancient cynicism, but other than loosening up, admitting more humor into our lives, and allowing some people to be as anti-social as they like, it is not clear exactly what we should do about making modern society more cynical in the ancient sense.

Soon after, André Comte-Sponville's *Valeur et vérité* proposed a reading of commonalities between Diogenes and Machiavelli as a basis for a third way between the Platonic view that virtue can be known and the sophistic view that truth is a group choice.²² Machiavelli is cynical in something close to the modern meaning: a realist who separates politics and morals. Where Diogenes rejects politics in favor of morals, Machiavelli subordinates morals to politics. The former is the traditional, and the latter is the modern meaning of the word cynicism. Comte-Sponville thinks both are worthwhile, and offers a reading of what he calls a general cynicism (and also a radical materialism, in the philosophical sense) which claims that values are based on the will of the individual, not on objective or socially-determined truth. It is also a matter of action: Diogenes refuted the theory that there is no such thing as motion by getting up and walking. Your life, what you do, is worth more than what you say. That means, Comte-Sponville says, that if you are anti-racist or anti-fascist, you cannot rely on philosophy to prove that you are right. The only thing supporting you is the will of other individuals who are anti-racist and anti-fascist. The racists and fascists are supported by other racists and fascists: the truth does not take sides. But this is the lesson of history: it is the personal side-taking that counts.

Not only is Comte-Sponville's cynicism Machiavellian, but it is Spinozist and Wittgensteinian. From Spinoza –“the most radical of all the cynics” (p. 48) – he draws the idea that we consider good what we desire, not the other way around. From Wittgenstein he draws the point that a complete description of all the facts about the world would not say anything about ethics.²³ “Such an idea is cynical” (p. 50) because ethics can never be a science, and thus we are left with nothing but our will. Thus, although Diogenes himself stayed out of politics, these later cynics justify political action if that is what a cynic feels the desire to do. If the foundation of modern liberalism is really just a matter of will or willfulness,²⁴ then modern liberalism is fundamentally cynical. But so is fascism, conceived of as a *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefensthal). Comte-Sponville's reading of Machiavelli, Spinoza, and

²² Comte-Sponville, *Valeur et vérité*.

²³ Sloterdijk also calls Wittgenstein “the Diogenes of modern logic”: *Critique of Cynical Reason*, p. 35.

²⁴ See R. Flathman, *Willful Liberalism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.

Wittgenstein as cynics puts cynicism in the mainstream of the history of philosophy and of modern political life. In some ways it continues the French tradition of existentialism, which maintains that deciding how to live your life is a free choice. Comte-Sponville is not worried about it, but rather thinks it is a defensible and even beneficial philosophy.

Nevertheless, for at least the last twenty years cynicism in the modern sense has been worrying American social scientists and cultural critics. Some social scientists who have used the word in book titles make no reference at all to the ancient Greek tradition.²⁵ Others, who are aware of the tradition, such as Donald Kanter and Philip Mirvis, have diagnosed many of the problems of modern working life as a product of cynicism, which is to be distinguished from healthy skepticism.

Skepticism is healthy, probing, and often creative and is of value to an organization... Sceptics doubt the substance of communications; cynics not only doubt what is said but the motives for saying it.²⁶

Cynical business managers and workers assume the worst about each other:

cynics project their own suspicions of human nature onto authority figures and other people.²⁷

Joseph Capella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson have analyzed political life in similar terms: a “spiral of cynicism” occurs when journalists characterize politicians in terms of their underlying strategies and tactics such that we learn not to believe anything they say at face value.²⁸ Instead of healthy skepticism, we have a dogmatic assumption that they are lying for self-interested purposes (pp. 26, 236–237). Then we can go on to distrusting the journalists and everyone else in public life. Cynicism is contagious and all-pervasive, and leads to stalemate, withdrawal from politics, and delegitimation.

Cultural critics have also examined modern cynicism. Sociologist Jeffrey Goldfarb came to the study of American culture from his study of Soviet culture, where he had concluded that cynicism was a key component of Soviet totalitarianism.²⁹ In his definition, “cynicism in our world is a form of legit-

²⁵ E. g. R. Arnett and P. Arneson, *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.

²⁶ D. Kanter and P. Mirvis, *The Cynical Americans*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989, p. 301.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

²⁸ J. Capella and K. Hall Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

²⁹ J. Goldfarb, *Beyond Glasnost*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

imation through disbelief.”³⁰ Cynics draw on relativism as a philosophical basis, and think that all ideas are the product of class, nationality, self-interest (p. 10). If everything is an ideology, there is no point in trying to get beyond it, so we become resigned and enervated. To Goldfarb, the critical cynicism of Diogenes would be a good thing, but the mocking cynicism of the resigned is bad because it supports the status quo (pp. 16–19, 30). The prediction of the failure of all attempts at idealism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (p. 22).

In Goldfarb’s analysis, Tom Wolfe’s *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987) is the best portrait ever written of cynicism in the United States (p. 25). It contrasts nicely with Alexis de Tocqueville: “The one thing Tocqueville is not is a cynic” (p. 35). But many writers of left (old and new) and right (Allan Bloom) are. So that leaves a return to some of the older verities in American culture as an answer to cynicism:

for the great bulk of ordinary people, democratic culture in America has both justified their dignity and empowered them. (p. 17).

And Goldfarb turns to Toni Morrison’s African American novel *Beloved* (1987) as an example of a non-cynical exploration of dilemmas that offers a way out of cynicism (pp. 161 ff.). In its most general form, Goldfarb’s answer to prevailing cynicism is that it is still possible to be uncynically optimistic about human nature.

A few years later, political theorist William Chaloupka wrote that “defined concisely, cynicism is the condition of lost belief.”³¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. led the last effective believer protest movement in the United States, he says, so all we are left with is unbelievers (p. 59). Unbelief, in this sense, is the result of the clash between political reality and high ideals, symbols of purity, and so forth. Believers always describe cynics in negative terms (p. 20), but if all we have are unbelievers, we better find a silver lining in the cloud. So, like others, he distinguishes good cynics – sometimes using Sloterdijk’s spelling (kynics) – from bad cynics. Bad cynics are the ones who pretend to Stoic and communitarian ideals, but do not live by them (pp. 158–169). Good cynics are the perpetual critics.

In Chaloupka’s analysis, “the reporter is America’s archetypal cynic” (p. 8) and “TV is cynical” (p. 103). Lawyers are practically the definition of cynics (pp. 38–39). So the constant babble of bad news and criticism from the media and the ever-growing threat of lawsuits represent cynicism at its highest. But

³⁰ J. Goldfarb, *The Cynical Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

³¹ W. Chaloupka, *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. xiv.

unlike the negative evaluation of those phenomena, Chaloupka's analysis makes it possible for us to appreciate some of this as a healthy and beneficial check on our tendencies toward Stoic self-righteousness.

For Chaloupka, the solution to bad cynicism is politics (p. 223). Good cynics provoke us to vote, contribute money, and participate in politics in unselfish ways. It is possible, he writes, "that democracy positively needs the cynic" (209) in order to challenge, subvert, and make fun of elites in power. Calls for civility and community are not helpful if precisely the problem is that one part of the community feels neglected or even oppressed by other parts of the community (p. 212). Sanctimonious claims of unity deserve to be exploded with cynical humor if they are not spontaneous on everyone's part.

Chaloupka observes that almost by definition cynics lie about their real feelings, either as irony or for selfish purposes. So ordinary methods of polling and interviewing will be ineffective and miss the real story. We need methods that can reveal the cynic under the surface. So one purpose of the study of cynicism can be to provide the categories and terminology for getting at one of the root philosophical bases of modern politics. Perhaps most Americans are cynics without knowing it. Understanding that may help us understand them, and give us ideas for therapy. And where Chaloupka is writing with the United States in mind, it is not too difficult to see that various forms of cynicism are widespread in Europe and elsewhere, and in need of both understanding and treatment.

Wilber Caldwell is one of the recent voices to continue the critique of cynicism.³² He knows that cynicism has evolved since the ancients, and that it has gone downhill. It is a product of disappointment: the dreams of liberty, democracy, equality, and progress have all been disappointed (pp. 118-21). In contrast to the active, imprudent, and even arrogant cynicism of the ancients, all we have left is the selfish cynicism of elites and a distrustful, prudent, and detached cynicism of the powerless masses (p. 31). In his analysis, cynicism of both types "subverts, resists, undermines, and sabotages the American Dream" (p. 140). But even the better kind of cynicism "is not really an alternative strategy [...] it is a perpetual dead end" (p. 140).

Like Chaloupka, Caldwell does not believe that a new "belief" is the solution. But following Diogenes, action might be the solution. Not just any action, but action designed to bring about a prudent American dream that really could come true (pp. 154-57). Some of what he proposes is quite radical: the obsessive materialism of the American Dream must be jettisoned, and so must nationalist visions of American superiority (pp. 160-62). But these

³² W. Caldwell, *Cynicism and the Evolution of the American Dream*, Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, 2006.

are not at all out of keeping with Diogenes's cynical demands. Ancient and modern cynicism can justify a radical politics.

In keeping with its radical demands, contemporary cynicism could use radical means. Our anecdotes have Antisthenes and Diogenes hitting people with their staffs in order to make a point (e.g. DL VI 25, 35, 67-9). This could be extrapolated to justify some of the milder forms of violence in contemporary times. Some have suggested that Seattle-style street violence is the only way to get the attention of our governing class. John Medearis has recently noted that social movements have often used disruptive tactics as a way of changing the social relations that frame public discourse in order to press their demands for change.³³ In this respect, they could be interpreted as cynics. One problem with this analysis is that some of the people involved in social movements are not at all interested in self-denial and asceticism, but rather seek more material wealth and status. They might adopt ancient means, but would not go along with ancient ends.

3. Conclusion

To sum up, we have seen that cynicism may be more widespread and fundamental in modern society than most people have realized. It has two sides: moralistic rejection of much of modern materialism and society on behalf of individual self-discipline and freedom, and hypocritical failure to live up to that moralism. Both kinds of cynicism have a role to play. Neither of them will ever be the middle way of honest moderation in pursuit of practical goals within the status quo. But human life will probably never be limited to only that sort of politics, and if it were, it would be boring.

Each of the two sorts of cynicism has its positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, moralistic antimaterialism and individualism can be a bracing reminder that our societies are too materialistic and conformist. On the negative side, most people are never going to embrace asceticism and extreme individualism. Probably no one would argue that everyone should be a cynic, even of the good kind. But politics will be less honest if this kind of cynic disappears entirely.

On the positive side, the hypocritical manipulation of the bad kind of cynicism may make it possible to soften the harshest edges of moralistic politics simply by subverting it. This is the good side of cynicism under totalitarian rule, for example. On the negative side, this kind of cynicism allows free

³³ J. Medearis, "Social Movements and Deliberative Democratic Theory," *British Journal of Political Science*, 35 (2005), pp. 53-75.

rein for selfish exploitation of the system. But it is probably never going to go away, so we ought to get used to it and learn how to live with it.

If there were no cynicism of either the bad or the good sort, life would be less complex and interesting. To the best of our knowledge, in all the animal kingdom only humans can be cynical. That means that along with other designations of what is special about human beings we can add that we are the “cynical animal.” This makes us a more multi-faceted, interesting, and metaphorically colorful animal. Learning to understand all kinds of cynicism is therefore part of any good anthropology, and ought to help us cope with the human condition.

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