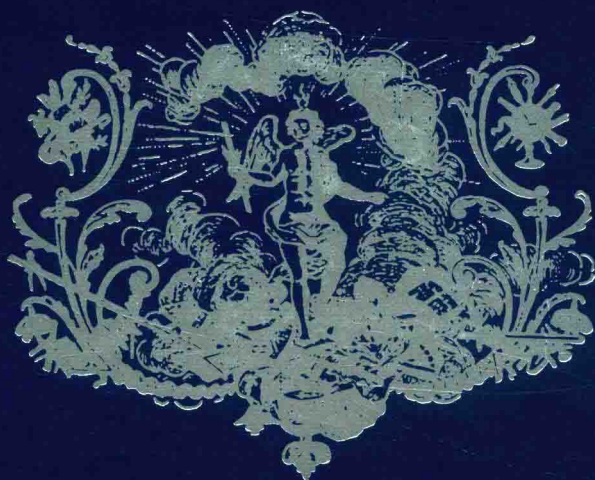


*The French Enlightenment  
and the Emergence of  
Modern Cynicism*



SHARON A. STANLEY

CAMBRIDGE

# The French Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Cynicism

SHARON A. STANLEY

*University of Memphis*



**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,  
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press  
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org  
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107014640

© Sharon A. Stanley 2012

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception  
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,  
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written  
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2012

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data*

Stanley, Sharon A., 1977–  
The French Enlightenment and the emergence of modern cynicism / Sharon  
A. Stanley.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-01464-0 (hardback)

1. Political science – France – Philosophy – History – 18th century.
2. Cynicism – History. 3. Enlightenment – France. 1. Title.

JA84.F8569 2012

320.01-dc23 2011040847

ISBN 978-1-107-01464-0 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs  
for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and does not  
guarantee that any content on such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

## The French Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Cynicism

Sharon A. Stanley analyzes cynicism from a political-theoretical perspective, arguing that cynicism is not unique to our time. Instead, she posits that cynicism emerged in the works of philosophers of the French Enlightenment, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Denis Diderot. She explains how eighteenth-century theories of epistemology, nature, sociability, and commerce converged to form a recognizably modern form of cynicism, foreshadowing postmodernism. Although recent scholarship and popular commentary have depicted cynicism as threatening to healthy democracies and political practices, Stanley argues instead that the French philosophes reveal the possibility of a democratically hospitable form of cynicism.

Sharon A. Stanley is Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Memphis. She has written articles on the Enlightenment and cynicism for *Political Theory*, *Eighteenth-Century Thought*, and *Polity*.

“When is the last time you heard someone say that what we need today is more cynicism? Starting with some of the best thinkers of the eighteenth century, such as Diderot and Rousseau, and showing how Rousseau got it wrong by becoming a moralist and Diderot got it right by remaining a cynic, Sharon Stanley explains how cynicism can actually benefit modern (or postmodern) democracy.”

– John Christian Laursen, University of California, Riverside

“A wonderful rejoinder to the widespread lamentations about the alleged rise of cynicism and death of civil discourse. According to Stanley’s careful study, cynicism is not a ‘postmodern’ arrival, but a rich tradition with roots in the French Enlightenment. This book will change how you think about the opposition between modernity and postmodernity and the political value of cynicism itself.”

– Jill Locke, Gustavus Adolphus College

“Though pundits may treat political cynicism as the result of some recent political or economic mishap, Stanley’s lucidly argued, very timely book traces the emergence of modern cynicism back to the writings of French philosophers such as Diderot and Rousseau. She argues that the Enlightenment philosophers’ ambivalent embrace of their era’s commercial and market-driven sociability helped cynicism to become an ineradicable feature of post-Enlightenment societies and their social forms. Rather than treating this constitutive ‘impurity’ in our interactions as a cause of despair, however, Stanley suggests that there are times in democratic politics when it is precisely the actions we might describe as cynical (i.e., opportunistic, disbelieving, or accommodating) that allow political action or change to occur in the first place. An engaging and thoughtful study, which should appeal to scholars specializing in French Enlightenment philosophy, eighteenth-century literary studies, and contemporary political theory.”

– David Mazella, University of Houston

“A masterful examination of the intimate relationship between democracy and cynicism. Stanley offers a trenchant critique of alarmist cries about the death of democracy at the hands of cynicism and boldly argues that cynicism is not only endemic to modern democratic theory as it was developed in the eighteenth century, but is also crucial to the health of democracy today. Elegantly written, Stanley’s book also offers a delightful and provocative reevaluation of Diderot as the true figurehead of the Enlightenment and an author who might have more to say to us, today, than his more famous contemporaries Voltaire and Rousseau.”

– Louisa Shea, The Ohio State University

## Acknowledgments

This is my first book, and I am indebted to a great number of people for their support and advice throughout the lengthy process of researching, writing, and revising it. It was in my early days as a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley that the faintest glimmer of the idea to write a book about cynicism first emerged. Above all, this book could not exist without Wendy Brown, originally the chair of my dissertation committee and an unfailingly generous mentor ever since, who helped me not only with her always insightful commentary on countless drafts of this manuscript but also with her encouragement and warmth. Additionally, I received invaluable commentary at Berkeley from members of Wendy Brown's dissertation group seminar, as well as my dissertation committee members Mark Bevir and David Bates.

In the Fall of 2006, I moved with some apprehension from Berkeley to the University of Memphis, to take my first position as an assistant professor of political science. Fortunately, my apprehension was unwarranted, as my colleagues have proven incredibly welcoming and supportive. I am especially grateful to the current chair of my department, Matthias Kaelberer, for his unstinting support and always helpful advice throughout the publication process. I also benefited from the hard work and dedication of several graduate-student research assistants, including Christy Lewis, David Plunk, Maegan Traynom, and Jeffrey Leedham.

I have presented portions of this manuscript at numerous conferences, and it has been improved by the comments of countless audience members and discussants. I would especially like to thank David Mazella and Louisa Shea, with whom I have participated on several panels about

cynicism. Both have published books about cynicism that served as models and inspirations for my own. David Mazella has been an invaluable resource and correspondent for several years, as I completed the book, and when he revealed to me that he also served as a reviewer of the manuscript I was not at all surprised but grateful for his very close and insightful reading.

Indeed, I am grateful to all the anonymous reviewers of my manuscript. The book is greatly improved, thanks to their commentary and suggestions. Dean Mathiowetz, like David Mazella, has subsequently identified himself to me as a reviewer of the manuscript, and I am awed at the incredibly meticulous reading he gave my work. Similarly, my editor at Cambridge University Press, Robert Dreesen, has enthusiastically supported this project from his first encounter with my book proposal to its final stages and was particularly helpful as I formulated my plan of revisions based on the reviewers' comments.

Finally, I cannot imagine undertaking this project without the support and encouragement of my family and friends, especially my mother, Doris Stanley; my father, Richard Stanley; and my brother, Kenneth Stanley. My friends, now scattered around the country and indeed the world, make me feel as though I have homes in Memphis, San Francisco, Boston, New York, Austin, Madison, Paris, and Sydney, among other places. I could not possibly name them all here. Nonetheless, I would like to conclude by expressing my overwhelming gratitude to Robyn Marasco, Jimmy Casas Klausen, and Charlotte Epstein. All three have offered brilliant commentary at various times on earlier drafts of this book, but far more important, all three have taught me how profound friendship can be. I have learned more about political theory and indeed about life from conversations with them than from any conference panel, classroom discussion, or academic paper.

I thank the following journals for permission to reprint material originally published in their pages:

Small sections of the Introduction and Chapters 5, 6, and 7 were published together as "Retreat from Politics: The Cynic in Modern Times," in *Polity* 39, no. 3 (July 2007): 384–407. Reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

An earlier version of Chapter 2 was published as "Unraveling Natural Utopia: Diderot's *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville*," in *Political Theory* 37, no. 2 (April 2009): 266–289, by SAGE Publications Ltd. All rights reserved. © 2009.

An earlier version of Chapter 5 was published as “Hermits and Cynics in the Enlightenment: Rousseau and Rameau’s Nephew,” in *Eighteenth-Century Thought* 4 (2009): 311–345. Reproduced with permission of *Eighteenth-Century Thought* and AMS Press.

This work was supported in full or in part by a grant from the University of Memphis Faculty Research Grant Fund. This support does not necessarily imply endorsement by the University of research conclusions.



# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	page vii
Introduction	i
PART I: THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY	
1 Enlightenment as Disillusionment	25
2 Unraveling Natural Utopia: Diderot's <i>Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville</i> and the Legacy of Cynicism	48
3 The Dark Side of Sociability: Philosophes and Libertines	75
4 The Leveling Power of Commerce	106
5 Hermits and Cynics: Rousseau and <i>Rameau's Nephew</i>	128
PART II: THE PRESENT	
6 From Enlightenment to Postmodernism	157
7 Disenchanted Democracy and the Ineradicability of Cynicism	180
<i>Bibliography</i>	207
<i>Index</i>	219

## Introduction

*We live in cynical times.* This diagnosis has become commonplace, if not ubiquitous, in contemporary cultural commentary. The bitter urban cynic is a stock character type in literature, film, and popular culture, casting aspersions and scorn on anything we might still dare hold sacred. Furthermore, we are told, this cynicism has an alarming political dimension: we have lost faith in democracy. We condemn our elected leaders as irredeemably corrupt and our highest ideals as mere sham, to be trotted out at convenient moments for vacuous lip service. And so, the story goes, we have retreated from political participation and social action into the world of private pleasures and pursuits, smug in our knowledge that at least we won't get fooled again.

This pervasive diagnosis appears in both popular and scholarly discourse. News stories in the United States routinely refer to cynical citizens and cynical politicians, and editorial columns frequently lament the growing cynicism of voters, or students, or ordinary Americans, or whichever group the author imagines ought to emblemize the virtues of hope and idealism. In a July 2004 editorial in *Newsweek*, in the midst of a presidential election, Tony Judt warned that “cynical politicians beget cynical voters” and “without trust, democracy dies.”<sup>1</sup> Politicians routinely inveigh against the scourge of cynicism during election campaigns, conveniently presenting themselves as antidotes to this toxic malaise. Indeed, it was during the 2004 election that current president Barack Obama began his meteoric ascent to power with his keynote address to the Democratic National Convention, in which he offered a stark choice: “In the end,

<sup>1</sup> Tony Judt, “A Matter of Public Trust,” *Newsweek*, 26 July 2004, 15.

that's what this election is about. Do we participate in a politics of cynicism or do we participate in a politics of hope?"<sup>2</sup> Obama reiterated this theme during the 2008 presidential campaign, presenting himself as the candidate of hope and change, juxtaposed to the old, cynical politics that ensured stagnation and civic alienation. Celebrating his victory in the Democratic primary in South Carolina, he proclaimed: "Because in the end, we are not just up against the ingrained and destructive habits of Washington, we are also struggling against our own doubts, our own fears, and our own cynicism."<sup>3</sup>

The depiction of cynicism as a growing threat to the very soul of democracy has become something of a cottage industry in the larger publishing industry. In the 1990s and 2000s, at least six books intended for broad audiences decried the cynical poison infecting American society and recommended in various ways vanquishing cynicism by reclaiming values such as hope, faith, idealism, and benevolence.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Americans are hardly the only ones lamenting the growth of cynicism and its toxic impact on democracy. A July 2008 article in the *Observer* ominously proclaims the research finding of the Syntony Research Team at the London School of Economics: "Cynicism may now represent one of the greatest threats to democracy."<sup>5</sup> The article cites members of the research team levying a variety of apocalyptic charges against cynicism: "The consequences of such cynicism are vast, the team believes. It can result in people disengaging from politics, turning away from major media, or boycotting products. It could also prompt people to join pressure groups or, in more extreme cases, to resort to direct action or violence."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Barack Obama, "Keynote Address" (Democratic National Convention, Boston, 27 July 2004), <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/convention2004/barackobama2004dnc.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Barack Obama, "South Carolina Victory Speech" (Columbia, SC, 26 January 2008), [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/01/barack\\_obamas\\_south\\_carolina\\_v.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2008/01/barack_obamas_south_carolina_v.html).

<sup>4</sup> In chronological order of publication, these books include Jeffrey Goldfarb, *The Cynical Society: The Culture of Politics and the Politics of Culture in American Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Richard Stivers, *The Culture of Cynicism: American Morality in Decline* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994); Michael Lerner, *The Politics of Meaning: Restoring Hope and Possibility in an Age of Cynicism* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996); Ronald Arnett and Pat Arneson, *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age: Community, Hope, and Interpersonal Relationships* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); Henry Giroux, *Public Spaces, Private Lives: Beyond the Culture of Cynicism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001); Wilber Caldwell, *Cynicism and the Evolution of the American Dream* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Davies, "Cynicism 'Can Damage Democracy's Health,'" *Observer*, 14 September 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Davies, "Cynicism 'Can Damage Democracy's Health.'"

The article concludes by noting, with no apparent irony, that the Syntony Research Team is developing a cynicism index, the Cyndex, which it hopes to market commercially.

Across these works, the concept of cynicism is presented as a largely transparent term with a clear and obvious referent. But more theoretical and philosophical treatments of cynicism reveal its profound complexity as a concept. Peter Sloterdijk famously introduced the concept of cynicism as the final, melancholic resting place of an exhausted critical consciousness in his 1983 work, the *Critique of Cynical Reason*, counterposing the ugliness of modern cynicism to the virtues of its ancient ancestor, classical Cynicism.<sup>7</sup> Sloterdijk's masterful study was deeply rooted in his German context, taking up German historical experiences and philosophical dilemmas largely adopted from the tradition of German critical theory. Nonetheless, in the years since its publication and particularly its 1987 translation into English, numerous scholars situated outside of Germany have found something compelling about Sloterdijk's book. Both his elegant definition of cynicism as "enlightened false consciousness" and his diagnosis of cynicism as the dominant form of contemporary consciousness have been more or less endorsed by a diverse array of scholars.<sup>8</sup>

Five book-length English-language studies of cynicism, in a more philosophical register than the previous citations, have followed on its heels: Timothy Bewes's 1997 *Cynicism and Postmodernity*, William Chaloupka's 1999 *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America*, David Mazella's 2007 *The Making of Modern Cynicism*, Benjamin Schreier's 2009 *The Power of Negative Thinking: Cynicism and the History of Modern Literature*, and Louisa Shea's 2010 *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon*.<sup>9</sup> Beyond these sustained studies, many thinkers have offered brief ruminations on the pervasive cynicism of our times in broader commentaries. For example, Frederic Jameson acknowledges

<sup>7</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> See Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 5, for his celebrated definition of cynicism. The degree to which Sloterdijk's thesis has been endorsed should not be overstated, however. Although his diagnosis and definition have appealed to many, his suggested cure, a return to the cheeky, subversive "kynicism" of the Greek Cynics, has been enormously controversial.

<sup>9</sup> Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1997); William Chaloupka, *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); David Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007); Benjamin Schreier, *The Power of Negative Thinking: Cynicism and the History of Modern American Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009); Louisa Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

the “universal triumph of what Sloterdijk calls ‘cynical reason’ in the omnipresent consumerism of the postmodern today.” Slavoj Žižek also identifies our age as a profoundly cynical one, in which ideology’s ultimate triumph lies in a perverse revelation of its deepest secrets: “today, however, in the era of cynicism, ideology can afford to reveal the secret of its functioning (its constitutive idiocy, which traditional, pre-cynical ideology had to keep secret) *without in the least affecting its efficiency.*” Terry Eagleton, though rejecting the sheer ubiquity of cynicism, nonetheless also draws a connection between what he calls “advanced capitalism” and cynical consciousness: “Advanced capitalism accordingly oscillates between meaning and non-meaning, pitched from moralism to cynicism and plagued by the embarrassing discrepancy between the two.”<sup>10</sup>

Four basic assumptions appear frequently across both the more popular and the more scholarly works on cynicism. First, cynicism is dangerous, producing a toxic form of antipolitical paralysis and rendering critique impotent. After dismissing our collective capacity to craft a more just world, cynics presumably resign themselves to getting by as best they can in a deeply compromised, imperfect, and corrupt world. Second, it has not always been thus. Today’s diagnosticians of cynicism imply that the present constellation of social, political, economic, and ideological forces breeds a pervasive, all-consuming cynicism that marks our age as different from earlier ones. Third, on a related note, many scholars suggest an intimate, albeit often undertheorized, relationship between postmodernism and cynicism, such that postmodernism comes to identify either the cultural or the material foundation of cynicism. Fourth and finally, cynicism is presented as an exhaustive disposition that thoroughly pervades an individual’s beliefs, motivation, character, and actions – one simply is or is not a cynic.

There is something troubling about all four of these assumptions. First, excessively reproachful screeds against cynicism often devolve into cynicism’s equally antipolitical foe, moralism.<sup>11</sup> In fact, as Alan Keenan has

<sup>10</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Postmodernism and the Market,” in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1994), 291; Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), 201; Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), 39.

<sup>11</sup> For useful examinations of the dangers that moralism poses to politics, see Jane Bennett and Michael Shapiro, eds., *The Politics of Moralizing* (New York: Routledge, 2002). The chapters in this book collectively demonstrate that moralism fetishizes an unattainable purity of motivation and an unrealistic organic community of shared values. Moralism

persuasively argued, moralism and cynicism tend to be mutually reinforcing, thus producing an unstoppable downward spiral of antipolitical recriminations and denunciations: “As with political rhetorics more explicitly based on guilt, the pretense to purity of any form of moralizing discourse is a ripe target for cynical unmasking.”<sup>12</sup> Second, cynicism’s temporal dimension, its strong association with recent historical developments, begs more questions than it answers: Why would cynicism become so ubiquitous in our present era? And what exactly marks this era, anyway? What did cynicism look like in the past, and how widespread was it? Does it even make sense to speak of cynicism as a transhistorical, clearly delineated mode of consciousness like this? One begins to worry that we may suffer from historical amnesia, or inflated self-importance, when we insist that cynicism is a plague unique to our own time. Third, the relationship posited between cynicism and postmodernism only further obscures the already-muddy waters. *Postmodernism* itself is a highly contested term whose causal relationship to cynicism is rarely clearly specified. If we consider postmodernism an intellectual, academic phenomenon, then it is difficult to conceive of how it might produce widespread popular cynicism. In contrast, if *postmodernism* simply names an already-existing popular mood that happens to be cynical, then it cannot itself be the cause of this mood. Alternatively, *postmodern cynicism* may capture a cultural reflex emerging from underlying material conditions; I explore this possibility in the penultimate chapter of the book. In any case, the apparent relationship between cynicism and postmodernism is ultimately far more complex and multivalent than the critics of postmodern cynicism allow.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the presumption that cynicism wholly defines an individual’s character and behavior produces profoundly caricatured depictions of contemporary “cynics.” Consider Luis Navia’s effort to distinguish modern cynics from their classical linguistic ancestors: “Akin to nihilism, cynicism leads individuals and nations to abandon all moral values and to drown in a fetid sea of intellectual and ethical moroseness

is therefore monological, certain of the rightness of its own standards, and unwilling to countenance disagreement, which always appears as a fall from virtue. It is this monological character of moralism that potentially shuts down politics.

<sup>12</sup> Alan Keenan, “The Twilight of the Political? A Contribution to the Democratic Critique of Cynicism,” *Theory and Event* 2, no. 1 (1998), [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/v002/2.1keenan.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/v002/2.1keenan.html).

<sup>13</sup> For examples of such critics, see Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publishing, 1996) and Christopher Norris, *What’s Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

and pessimism.”<sup>14</sup> Navia fails to consider that cynicism need not always be all-consuming and entirely exhaustive of a person’s disposition.

David Mazella and Benjamin Schreier have begun to move away from these problematic assumptions. Through a comprehensive genealogical study of cynicism, tracing its conceptual and rhetorical history from the ancient Greek Cynics through the British dandies of the nineteenth century, Mazella notes how the figure of the Cynic has served numerous different rhetorical and political purposes in a variety of historical circumstances. Such a history immediately calls into question any depiction of cynicism as a novel phenomenon, and Mazella demonstrates that denunciations of cynicism, no less than cynicism itself, have been recurrent features of American democracy.<sup>15</sup> This study leads him to conclude that cynicism, despite certain “affinities with conservative thought,” nonetheless “has genuine critical potential, revealing the extent to which our key concepts of collective action and planning rely on unexamined assumptions about progress, modernity, and modernization.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Schreier calls for a phenomenological treatment of cynicism rather than a moralistic denunciation that positions cynicism in a predetermined, teleological narrative of redemption: “My purpose, by contrast, is to try to discover how cynicism works rather than rushing to dismiss it in the name of a recognizable social trajectory.”<sup>17</sup> These approaches, more open and perhaps even sympathetic, serve as a necessary corrective for the doom saying and hysteria that have so often accompanied recent examinations of cynicism. This study is intended to complement and extend their efforts.

In contrast to Mazella’s sweeping genealogy (albeit centered on the British) and Schreier’s very specific examination of modernist American literature, my own study focuses on the emergence of a recognizably modern form of cynicism during the eighteenth-century French

<sup>14</sup> Luis Navia, *Diogenes of Sinope: The Man in the Tub* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 147. In contrast, Navia paints a generally positive and admiring portrait of Diogenes, whose commitment to speaking freely and living a self-sufficient life serves as a respectful model of forthright, honest human behavior. Benjamin Schreier offers a compelling response to the equation of cynicism with nihilism, arguing that cynicism retains a certain investment in the norms that nihilism absolutely rejects. See Schreier, *The Power of Negative Thinking*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> See Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism*, 2–3, for a backward glance at the critics of cynicism throughout American history. Mazella completes his historical rewind with the mid-nineteenth-century sermons of Henry Ward Beecher, who depicted the cynic in one sermon as a hideous leper.

<sup>16</sup> Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Schreier, *The Power of Negative Thinking*, 12.

Enlightenment.<sup>18</sup> In this regard, its historical emphasis most closely resembles Louisa Shea's *Cynic Enlightenment*. However, Shea analyzes the reception of Greek Cynicism during the Enlightenment, examining how the philosophes depicted, identified with, and distorted the legacy of Antisthenes and Diogenes. This examination leads her to some very suggestive reflections on the transformation of ancient to modern cynicism, and she eventually concludes that the Enlightenment essentially wrought this transformation:

A study of the history of Cynicism reveals that Sloterdijk's philosophical argument about the perversion of Cynicism does in fact have a historical basis: it is in the eighteenth century, more precisely within the circle of the French philosophes and in the context of debates on what it means to enlighten the world, that cynicism emerges from the vestiges of Cynicism and all but eclipses the ancient, philosophical meaning of the term.<sup>19</sup>

Shea's suggestion is enormously provocative but remains tangential to the story she tells about the philosophes' encounter with classical Cynicism. In the chapters that follow, I illuminate the aspects of enlightenment thought that contribute to a modern, disabused form of cynicism – for the relationship of the Enlightenment to cynicism does not only manifest in those moments when the philosophes self-consciously reflect on their relationship to the ancient Cynics. On the contrary, certain features of enlightenment thought and practice provide fertile ground for the growth of cynicism, even when the philosophes do not themselves explicitly name the consequences as such.<sup>20</sup> The chapters in Part 1 of this book isolate those features and demonstrate their contribution to modern cynicism. In the process, I call into question commonplace assumptions about cynicism, enlightenment, postmodernism, and the relationship among the three terms.

<sup>18</sup> In using the term *modern* here, I mean to contrast the cynicism of modernity with the classical Cynicism of the ancient Greeks – a distinction that I draw out further in this introduction. I do not use *modern* and *contemporary* interchangeably. In fact, I ultimately point to several noteworthy distinctions between the modern cynicism of the Enlightenment and contemporary cynicism, sometimes identified as postmodern cynicism.

<sup>19</sup> Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment*, 195.

<sup>20</sup> Indeed, as Shea notes, the word *cynicism* in the eighteenth century, when it did not refer to the ancients, applied to a mode of speaking – “an impudent, often obscene tone or style.” See Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment*, 108. Thus, we could not expect the philosophes to declare cynicism as a consequence of their own thought, but we might nonetheless find them reflecting on a constellation of beliefs and practices that we might identify today as cynicism.



## The Problem of Cynicism

Cynicism is a concept with a lengthy and tortuous history. We have traversed a long road from Diogenes, the archetypal Greek Cynic, “defacing the currency” of the polis to emphasize the wise counsel of nature, to today’s withdrawn, urban, cynical, postmodern everyman, lacking any such faith in the promptings of nature.<sup>21</sup> For the Greeks, Cynicism represented a coherent ethos, a comprehensive orientation toward the appropriate way of life to secure individual virtue and felicity. The very term *Cynic* reveals much about the beliefs and practices of the adherents of Cynicism. The word literally means “doglike,” and the most widely accepted etymology suggests that the term originates in a joke comparing the lifestyle of Diogenes to the habits of a dog.<sup>22</sup> The Cynics responded by embracing the term as a badge of honor, for it captured their contemptuous rejection of social convention, their impudent shamelessness, and their reversal of the ordinary hierarchy that placed man above the animals, closer to the gods. The “dogs” willfully flouted customary norms in public, such as proscriptions against public sex, masturbation, or defecation, refusing to view “natural” actions as shameful.<sup>23</sup> Thus, they often scandalized their contemporaries, but we would misunderstand Diogenes and his followers if we viewed them merely as attention-seeking provocateurs – for behind these “shameless” public displays lurked a specific pedagogical purpose. Diogenes wished to underscore the arbitrary and often hypocritical nature of contemporary social conventions while demonstrating that “nature” provided an alternative “shortcut” to virtue and happiness.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For a collection of excellent essays on the ancient Cynics, and their historical legacy, see R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, eds., *The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). For more sustained studies on the ancient Cynics, see Donald Dudley, *A History of Cynicism: From Diogenes to the 6th Century A.D.* (London: Methuen, 1937) and William Desmond, *The Cynics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>22</sup> R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, “Introduction,” in *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Numerous such stories can be found in Diogenes Laertius’s account of the life of Diogenes, in book 6 of *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*. Perhaps most notoriously, when Diogenes was caught masturbating in the marketplace, he allegedly lamented the fact that he could not relieve hunger merely by rubbing his belly. See Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge, U.K.: Loeb Classical Library, 1925), book 6, 2:47.

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, David Mazella pushes the point even further, suggesting that the Cynic shamelessness was motivated by the “missionary character” of Cynic philosophy. See Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism*, 26–27.