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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 emblematize 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.”1 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,

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that’s what this election is about. Do we participate in a politics of cynicism or do we participate in a politics of hope?” 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.”

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. 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.” 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.”

6 Davies, “Cynicism ‘Can Damage Democracy’s Health.’”
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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. 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.

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. 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

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8 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.
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.”

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. In fact, as Alan Keenan has

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11 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
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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.”

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 postmodern cynicism 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.

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.


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...and pessimism.” 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. 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.” 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.” 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

14 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.

15 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.

16 Mazella, The Making of Modern Cynicism, 7.

17 Schreier, The Power of Negative Thinking, 12.
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Enlightenment. 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 philosophers 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.

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. 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.

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18 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.


20 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.\(^{21}\) 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.\(^{22}\) 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.\(^{23}\) 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.\(^{24}\)


\(^{24}\) 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.
We may therefore identify both a negative and a positive project in Cynicism – the negative project, in relation to which we may begin to comprehend the usage of the term *cynic* in modern times, offered a stinging critique of contemporary Athenian civilization, with all its decadent luxury, hypocrisy, artifice, and endless multiplication of false needs. As Diogenes Laertius describes Diogenes, the most famous practitioner of Cynicism: “He was great at pouring scorn on his contemporaries.” Its positive project, in contrast, sought to give individuals a way out of the unhappy snares of civilization through a rigorous self-discipline that would train individuals to live in harmony with nature and to achieve the necessary conditions of happiness: freedom and self-sufficiency. According to Anthony Long, the primary tenet of classical Cynicism holds that “happiness is living in agreement with nature.” The two projects cannot be taken in isolation, insofar as individuals must recognize the falseness of social conventions before they seek happiness by other means. To put it schematically, the happy and virtuous Cynic sage rejects culture in favor of the wise counsel of nature, from which we can derive a clear ethical norm.

Insofar as any generation has its gadflies who scornfully “deface the currency” of the times, the basic impulse behind Cynicism endures throughout history. It is this critical impulse that links our modern and colloquial understanding of cynicism to the ancient school. More than just critics of civilization, the Cynics were exuberant satirists and unmaskers who gleefully punctured the pretensions and hypocrisies of their contemporaries. The modus operandi of this critical project did not involve elaborate or systematic philosophical engagements with morality, law, and ethics but rather guerilla rhetorical attacks in the shape of mocking aphorisms or impudent one-liners that relied on wit and humor to expose contemporary foibles. In these scornful attacks on the “respectful” mores of society, the Cynics loaned to the term *cynicism* its association with biting sarcasm and scathing contempt. But we must recall that this sarcasm and contempt, the negative side of the Cynical project,
was inextricably linked to its positive project, its pedagogical intent to lead men to happiness and self-sufficiency through an embrace of nature over and above the false contrivances of civilization. We can read modern cynicism as the result of a violent separation of the positive and negative projects of the classical Cynics. Modern cynicism has retained Diogenes’ negativity, his scathing and scornful critique of civilization and social convention, but severed it from its positive justification, its basic faith in nature as a redemptive alternative.

Indeed, for Sloterdijk, modern cynicism has jettisoned the most attractive parts of ancient Cynicism and transformed its cheeky, playful negativity into a state of frozen, bitter resignation: “It has withdrawn into a mournful detachment that internalizes its knowledge as though it were something to be ashamed of, and as a consequence, it is rendered useless for taking the offensive. The great offensive parades of cynical impudence have become a rarity; ill-humor has taken its place, and there is no energy left for sarcasm.”

On his account, cynicism has paralyzed modern subjects in an all-consuming, self-destructive, nihilistic state, whereas the ancient Cynics rejected contemporary social norms to achieve what Louisa Shea describes as “harmony with self, nature, and society.”

Although commonplace understandings of cynicism obviously lack Sloterdijk’s philosophical sophistication, they nonetheless echo his entirely negative depiction of modern cynicism as an exhaustive and pathological mode of subjectivity, born of a bitter disillusionment. Furthermore, to his concern with individual subjectivity, they add an additional concern about the political consequences of cynicism.

Consider William Chaloupka’s succinct definition of cynicism: “Defined concisely, cynicism is the condition of lost belief. Many American institutions and public practices have simply forfeited their constituents’ faith.” In other words, cynicism follows in the wake of disillusionment. Faith, belief, trust, and hope give way to suspicion, distrust, apathy, resignation, and withdrawal. The political downside to such an attitude hardly requires belaboring. A genuinely engaged practice of democratic citizenship requires a measure of trust in one’s leaders and, even more so, in one’s fellow citizens. Yet, as one commonplace dictionary definition of cynicism has it, cynics harbor “an attitude of scornful or jaded negativity, especially a general distrust of the integrity or professed motives of