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ARTIGOS

"NO EXCEPTIONS": CYNICAL SOLIDARITY IN THE FACE OF THE UNCONTROLLABLE AND THE UNCONSCIONABLE

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Abstract
Conventional analyses of cynicism tend to portray the phenomenon as a depoliticising, morally corrosive pathology. Against this view—and against the assumption that modern cynicism abandons the ethical integrity of ancient Cynics—I defend cynicism as an indispensable and revitalising mode of political consciousness encompassing: (1) a distinct mode of solidarity fostered and maintained among those who feel alienated or excluded from conventional political processes; (2) a rhetorical strategy ('invidious ascription') deploying biting humour and derisive analogy to undermine vacuous ideals and oppressive consensus; (3) a ethical-existential commitment to prepare for radical uncertainty. Understanding cynicism as a set of political techniques (rather than a persona or moral posture) encourages a reassessment of its supposed parasitism and contamination of otherwise healthy democracies. Cynicism is never itself the instigator of political corruption or moral turpitude, but it might be seen as a catalyst for the ruination/rebuilding of corrupted political contexts. This is cynicism's danger, as well as the source of its creative potential.

Keyword
Cynicism, Diogenes of Sinope, Political Rhetoric, Social Movements (BLM and Palestine), Donald Trump.

"SIN EXCEPCIONES": SOLIDARIDAD CÍNICA FRENTE A LO INCONTROLABLE Y LO INCONCEBIBLE

Resumen
Los análisis convencionales del cinismo tienden a retratar el fenómeno como una patología despolitizadora y moralmente corrosiva. Contra esta visión —y contra la suposición de que el cinismo moderno abandona la integridad ética de los antiguos cínicos— defiendo el cinismo como un modo indispensable y revitalizador de conciencia política que abarca: (1) un modo distinto de solidaridad, fomentado y mantenido entre aquellos que se sienten alienados o excluidos de los procesos políticos convencionales; (2) una estrategia retórica ("atribución insidiosa") que utiliza humor mordaz y analogías sarcásticas para socavar ideales vacíos y consensos opresivos; (3) un compromiso ético-existencial para prepararse ante la incertidumbre radical. Comprender el cinismo como un conjunto de técnicas políticas (en lugar de una postura moral o un rasgo de personalidad) fomenta una reevaluación de su supuesta naturaleza parasitaria y de su alegada contaminación de democracias saludables. El cinismo nunca es, por sí mismo, el instigador de la corrupción política o la depravación moral, pero puede considerarse un catalizador tanto para la ruina como para la reconstrucción de contextos políticos corruptos. Este es el peligro del cinismo, así como la fuente de su potencial creativo.

Palabras clave
Cinismo, Diógenes de Sinope, Retórica política, Movimientos sociales (BLM y Palestina), Donald Trump.

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Introduction

Despairing assessments of Western democracy frequently attribute its decline to the spread of cynicism in public discourse.[1] According to the conventional view, 'cynicism' signals withdrawal from political life, driven by a jaundiced dismissal of government and dogmatic belief in humanity's guilelessness and turpitude. The presumption of the cynic is that the system is hopelessly rigged to serve the interests of the powerful, and the rest of us are too stupid or too selfish to foment change. And it is this same presumption, according to many theorists, that allows authoritarian regimes to abide and proliferate, as 'good' people abandon any goal beyond self-preservation:

> Mass propaganda discovered that its audience was ready at all times to believe the worst, no matter how absurd, and did not particularly object to being deceived because it held every statement to be a lie anyhow…A mixture of gullibility and cynicism is prevalent in all ranks of totalitarian movements, and the higher the rank the more cynicism weighs down gullibility. The essential conviction shared by all ranks, from fellow-traveller to leader, is that politics is a game of cheating.[2]

According to this perspective, if resistance to despotism ever emerges, it does so in spite of cynical disenchantment; there is simply no way for cynicism to constructively contribute to emancipation. True political freedom can only be found in the light of counterfactual ideals and must remain amenable to rational scrutiny and consensus (or at least respectful dissensus). Cynicism only anticipates disappointment and betrayal.

At least this remains the conventional thinking on cynicism's debilitating effects on moral and political agency. My goal in this article is to counter the widespread assumption that cynicism is inimical to democratic sociality and emancipation. In fact, cynicism is more accurately described as a *facilitator* of solidarity and moral agency through the long dark nights of political irrationality and existential uncertainty. Rather than self-serving or defeatist, cynicism has a capacity to foster resilient, lasting alliances, and release agents from unreflective jingoism, nihilism, and complicity in injustices. Although it works to preserve ideals primarily through negation and contradiction, cynicism remains indispensable in affording moral-political anchoring to the powerless, and in puncturing insufferable consensus.

1. Cynicism as affirmative powerlessness

Despite the relative familiarity of Diogenes of Sinope as the paradigmatic Cynic, and despite the prevalence of the term within contemporary discourse, there remains a distinct lack of clarity regarding what cynicism's practices and beliefs entail—which only compounds the difficulty of measuring or tracking its effects.[3] The tendency of recent empirical studies has been to treat 'cynicism' as synonymous with 'distrust' towards

[1] Bauer, *The Unravelling*; Caldwell, *Cynicism and the Evolution of the American Dream*; Deneen, *Democratic Faith*; Giroux, *Public Spaces, Private Lives*; Chaloupka, *Everybody Knows*.
[2] Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, p. 500.
[3] Rijkhoff, *Still Questioning Cynicism*.

political institutions and their representatives.[4] However, *distrusting* the sincerity of elected leaders or the responsiveness of institutions remains safely within the bounds of conventional legislative reform and oversight. It is not difficult to intuit the difference between a distrustfulness that remains hopeful of eventually overcoming political estrangement, and a *cynicism* that decries existing social conditions as irredeemably unjust. Whereas a sceptic might still await the emergence of an inspirational figure to rectify an iniquitous status quo, we expect the cynic to view any such reformer as too naive or too vainglorious to be worthy of our confidence. Distrust denotes *discontentment*, cynicism connotes *contempt*. So how does such a sentiment find expression in ancient or modern social praxis?

By focusing attention on the *functioning* of cynical speech and solidarity, I am encouraging an analytical shift from the sociological/psychological profiling of cynics, and the historical idealisation of 'ancient' versus 'modern' cynicism. Whereas some commentators insist upon a clear divide between the cynicism of predominantly modern 'master-insiders' versus predominantly ancient 'disempowered-outsiders',[5] I focus attention upon the universalisable qualities of cynical utterances and social ties. In this respect, my approach differs from both Michel Foucault's and Peter Sloterdijk's speculative reconstructions of ethical *askēsis* and performative *kynicism*, encompassing ascetic experimentation, 'cheeky' subversion, or 'courageous' truth-telling.[6] This is not to ignore the insuperable gaps separating contemporary political culture from that of fourth century Athens. My point is simply that the figure of the ancient *parrhēsiast* remains just that, a speculative construction, from which it is impossible to establish definitive distinctions between ancient and modern sensibilities.[7] We retain only a few fragments from Antisthenes, traditionally identified as Diogenes' proto-Cynic philosophic mentor (although his ties to the group are contested; see Dudley 1937), and nothing from Diogenes himself, nor from notable Cynic disciples, like Crates of Thebes or Hipparchia of Maroneia. Our primary source for their exploits remains the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, purportedly authored in the third century CE by Diogenes Laertius, hailing from the Greek east of the Roman Empire—whose authorship, historical reliability, and philosophical acuity remain a subject of some debate.[8]

One of the more curious absences within the historical record of ancient Cynicism is the lack of any mention or prosecution of what would unquestionably have been considered outrageous conduct and libellous speech. Fourth-century Athens, with its approximately 30,000 full citizens and 10,000 metics was too small a place for combative personalities like Diogenes to remain anonymous or be given free rein to abuse civic morality.[9] Reputations were jealously protected, as demonstrated by Aristophanes' legal dispute with the populist Athenian general, Cleon.[10] Public accusations of 'impiety' held potentially devastating consequences, as we know from Socrates's famous trial and

[4] On 'cynic' as a political typology likened to 'distrust,' see: Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. 2019. "Trust and Distrust in America": https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/trust-and-distrust-in-america/.
[5] Keenan, *The Twilight of the Political?*.
[6] Foucault, *The Government of the Self and Others*, pp. 63-66; Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, pp. 103-105.
[7] Niehues-Pröbsting, *The Modern Reception of Cynicism*, pp. 334-340.
[8] Grafton, *Diogenes Laertius*; Márkus, *Diogenes Laertius* Contra *Gadamer*.
[9] Hansen, *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes*, pp. 91-94.
[10] Sommerstein, *Harassing the Satirist*.

suicide.[11] And the legal category of *hubris*, which protected Athenian citizens from indignities suffered by slaves and non-citizens, would have been perfectly targeted against Diogenes's peculiar brand of performative offensiveness (including blaspheming gods and priests inside their temples, panhandling in the doorways of private homes, disrupting sporting events, and inciting violence against public figures). Despite being comprised mostly of non-Athenian metics, it would have been fully in keeping with Athenian legal precedent to bring members of the Cynic 'school' to trial, possibly to face condemnation by other prominent metics like Lysias or Dinarchus (indeed, within the historiographic tradition, the Diogenes supposed mentor, Antisthenes, is credited with the successful prosecution of Socrates's main accusers, Anytus and Meletus;).[12] While not conclusive, the absence of any correlating evidence from forensic oratory, comic plays, or philosophical treatises encourages our not taking Cynical anecdotes *literally*—particularly given the wealth of references to other corruptive forces like demagogues, foreign cults, and seditious sects found in the oratory of Demosthenes and the plays of Aristophanes.[13] If statesmen, poets, and moralists were regularly brought to trial, how was it possible for the Cynics to carry out their notorious provocations without consequence?[14]

In any event, our present focus is on non-mythical manifestations of cynical agency. Here I take my lead from Sharon A. Stanley, whose reconstruction of cynicism in the French Enlightenment (as manifested in Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* and Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*) defines cynicism as a set of 'tactics' by which hitherto marginalised actors "stage temporary, guerrilla assaults on the hegemonic institutions and norms".[15] Rather than a 'withdrawal' into comfortable-but-despondent 'enlightened false consciousness',[16] this vision of cynicism captures its active and engaged quality. Cynicism is 'performed' in the open. Whatever he was a real historical person or a quasi-mythical character, all versions of Diogenes emphasise his lack of shame in asserting his subordinated, marginal status. As a political exile and non-citizen, Diogenes had no hope of attaining equal political status [*isonomia*] and the concomitant right to address the Assembly [*isēgoria*]. But rather than decrying his condition as tragic, he lived openly in poverty and claimed himself (semi-ironically) to be truly free:

> [6.72] He would make fun of good breeding, reputation, and all such things, calling them the vulgar trappings ['cosmetics'— *prokosmemata*] of vice, and held that the only true commonwealth was that which was commensurate with the universe ['cosmos'— *kosmos*].[17]

[11] Waterfield, *Why Socrates Died*.
[12] Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, p. 264.
[13] Jameson, *Cults and Rites in Ancient Greece*; Christ, *The Litigious Athenian*.
[14] Although it cannot be my focus for the present essay, there is good reason to reconsider supposedly historical personages like Diogenes as having a function more akin to a mythical 'trickster'—which raises further questions about Western philosophy as a genre that excludes 'magic' but would have us believe that Alexander the Great sought out a homeless metic in Athens for advice on how to live: [6.38] As he was sunning himself in a grove, Alexander stood over him and said, "Ask whatever you wish of me," and he replied, "Stand out of my light." (Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, p. 277).
[15] Stanley, *The French Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Cynicism*, p. 203.
[16] Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*.
[17] Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, p. 292.

Diogenes' recasting of 'good breeding' as 'vulgar trappings of vice,' has been read as a principled refutation parochial Athenian identity and an endorsement of cosmopolitan 'commonwealth'.[18] However, such a domestication of Diogenes requires our injecting great moral significance into what can only ever be a fragmented assemblage of scornful remarks. There is actually very little to suggest Diogenes intended to convince his audience to expand their moral-political obligations, or that he even held a substantive commitment to cosmopolitanism as an ethos. In context, the only evident aim is to despoil the autochthony of political membership, likening it to gaudy, superficial ornamentation.

We have no reason to doubt Diogenes's antipathy towards a system that allowed the exclusivity of membership to signify possession of virtue. More than just decrying 'sour grapes,' what defines cynical affirmations is this sense of taking ownership over one's powerlessness 'as if' it was a deliberate choice (e.g. the rejection of 'cosmetic' status symbols in favour of truly cosmic universalism). Such positioning is more assertive than other forms of 'coping' precisely because it embraces a condition that would normally be considered unendurable. As a performative gesture it also seeks to elicit a response from onlookers, who might at first claim such affirmations to be unserious but are effectively called upon to reflect upon what *they* might do in such circumstances.

For the vast majority of people on this planet, there is little or no hope of attaining meaningful political or socioeconomic control in this lifetime.[19] In light of this, cynicism contrasts with nihilism by virtue of its deliberate suspension of obedience to scruples, even as one endeavours to survive or secure bargaining power within an iniquitous and corrupt system. The cynic is one who begs, while also asserting they are only demanding they are owed. Those lacking a capacity to overthrow an otherwise contemptible hegemonic order, may feel they have no other choice but to bide their time—this is not the same thing as being obsequious. Cynicism allows one to bend without breaking—to delay wholesale resignation in the hope that an opportunity for strategic reversal may yet emerge, and in the meantime to preserve a clear idea of the inherent falsity of the present. One's true moral beliefs do not simply disappear—they are preserved as a self-actualising anchoring point amidst moral rot.

While I do not intend to instrumentalise human suffering for the sake of philosophical illustration, Lori Allen's 2013 ethnography of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank offers a compelling account of cynical 'coping' made all the more relevant in light of the Israeli's state's current brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing. Allen's interviewees include teachers and trainees from what is now known as the Independent Commission for Human Rights (ichr.ps/en), an independent, semi-state monitoring body focusing on the conduct of both Israel and the Palestinian Authority as part of the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions. Beyond the more predictable instances of corruption, ineffectiveness, and abuse, what is striking about the observations by Allen's subjects is that despite the prevalent feeling that their work actively contributed to the whitewashing of human rights violations there remained a profound commitment to Palestinian sovereignty as a political aspiration and moral right:

> Cynicism is a critical stance by which those who are displeased with choices available in the present hold on to the belief that such limited options are not all that there should be. For many Palestinians, a horizon, however vague, of alternative

[18] Nussbaum, *The Cosmopolitan Tradition*.
[19] World Bank, *Poverty, Prosperity, and Planet Report 2024*.

> possibilities and hopes endures because a history of more satisfying political bonds and of contributions motivated by more sincerely held political values is remembered, or at least nostalgically imagined. Their national imaginings persist through ethical debate despite the absence of a nation-state. That critical stance is part of what is sustaining Palestinian nationalism, allowing a variety of uses of the human rights system and blocking the entrenchment of an authoritarian state apparatus."[20]

Allen is circumspect about translating 'cynical' into Arabic expressions for 'scornful' (*muhtaqir*), scoffing (*yahza'a*), or despair (*ya's*), but finds a useful approximation in 'fed-upness' (*zahaq*), which expresses collectively shared disappointment among those who have lost patience with a corrupt and ineffectual system, but must still find some way to abide within it (Allen 2013: 26). In the Palestinian case (at least prior to the perpetration of genocide over the past year) the ideality of human rights was not erased by the failure of the human rights establishment in preventing abuse; indeed, the meaning of those rights was thrown into clarifying relief by the falsity—the "empty words" (*haki fadi*)—of the human rights industry.[21] Not just the dream of a reconstituted Palestinian state, but the meaning and moral salience of nationhood itself is sharpened against the whetstone of every successive disappointment and betrayal. Deprived of the means to achieve statehood, the moral community must somehow be formed above the abyss separating the real from the ideal.[22]

For those left to abide within seemingly insurmountable and morally unconscionable conditions, the choice is to either cynically 'affirm' rule-bending and law-breaking, or to persist in following the rules in the hopes the arc of history will eventually bend their way. Interestingly, it is the latter option that holds sway for a significant cohort of Trump supporters, who endorse his promised deportation policy, even though they are themselves children of legal and illegal immigrants.[23] Palestinian 'cynicism' (to the extent it still manages to survive) positions itself against the unreality of laws and accords that are imposed as political 'realities'; it is a reason- and morality-preserving practice. Cynicism affirms the irrationality and cruelty of lawmaking and governance, and in doing so forges new solidarities amongst those outside the political and legal margins:

> "Being a good citizen is not as important as being myself; that is what I am. Government is not going to lose so much money if I say little things, little lies, you know, but someone is going to change their lifestyle, that's more important to me than actually me being a good citizen. Because I pay already so much tax anyway…I know how it feels being one of the others and now I'm given a chance to support my people, why not?" ('Jaf,' a Kurdish female, originally from Turkey, employs undocumented workers in restaurant, while based in the UK)[24]

Cynicism denigrates the virtues of 'good citizenship' in favour of localised exercises in moral decency. It finds moral 'grounding' through interpersonal loyalties and

[20] Allen, *The Rise and Fall of Human Rights*, p. 189.
[21] Allen, *The Rise and Fall of Human Rights*, p. 5.
[22] Allen, *The Rise and Fall of Human Rights*, p. 10.
[23] An October 2024 Siena poll for the New York Times suggests 40% of Latino and Hispanic voters support Trump's pledge to continue building a wall along the Mexico border and to conduct mass deportations of 'illegal' immigrants. (63% said they "do not feel like he is talking about me" in reference to Trump's statements on the dangers of immigration).
[24] Interview: Alice Bloch and Sonia McCay. 2016. *Living on the Margins: Undocumented Migrants in a Global City*. Oxford University Press.

remaining true to oneself. And it is these qualities that sustain us when the rest of the world is falling apart.

2. Cynical speech

In trying to understand what cynicism is and how it functions, it is vital to attend to the peculiar facets of cynical speech, which is the primary medium through which its disaffection is expressed. Through what I term *invidious ascription*, cynical speech assails conventional norms and breaks the implicit rules governing communicative interaction. Cynical speech is effectuated by the free deployment of unfair comparisons, indefensible assertions, and subverts common frames of reference. Despite the patchy historical record, there is at least broad consensus that the rhetoric of cynical speech entailed 'moral redescription,' per which base motives were subversively applied to virtuous qualities.[25] As the classicist A.A. Long suggests, this derisive strategy entails "turning names that are primarily descriptive into words that only pertain to those who merit the description".[26] Whereas other eccentric moralists might proffer radical visions of utopia, the Cynics used evocative imagery to nullify discussion, and permitted insult to serve as a substitute for philosophical debate:

> [6.24] He was also adept at heaping scorn on others. He called the school (*scholēn*) of Euclides "bile" (*cholēn*), Plato's discourse (*diatribēn*) a "waste of time" (*katatribēn*), the contests at the Dionysia "a spectacle for morons," and the demagogues "lackeys of the mob."[27]

If we are to define what is unique to cynical modes of expression, I would contend it is the dynamics of the speech-act, rather than any pithily stated 'cosmopolitanism' that matters. Diogenes radicalised scepticism against 'traditional' philosophical discourse, casting doubt upon the very transmissibility of insight. Operating in a characteristically reckless and disrespectful manner, cynical speech achieves its 'epiphanies' not through divine inspiration or reflection, but by getting 'under the skin' of their opponents, so that, in their anger and desperation 'truth' is revealed, which might otherwise have eluded scrutiny. The functionality of cynical speech resides in the moment of its own expression, in the infliction of damage. Whatever resonances Diogenes's insults and provocations hold beyond their initial communicative context, their interpreted meaning should not define 'cynical speech' precisely because of how easy it is for the most outrageous sentiments to become co-opted and drained of their ruinous power. Such co-optations can themselves be called 'cynical,' but only insofar as they help illustrate the fundamental meaninglessness and malleability of moral language.

How does this peculiar modality of speech manifest in more recent political history? When we consider milestones in progressive political history, the speeches and marches of the Civil Rights era are often presented as a high-water mark.[28] But it is not

[25] Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism*; Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*.
[26] Long, *The Socratic Tradition*.
[27] Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, p. 270.
[28] Younge, *The Speech*.

difficult to find dissonant counterpoints to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Dream." Consider the following from Malcolm X's infamous 1964 "The Ballot or the Bullet" speech given to the Cleveland chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality:

> No, I'm not an American. I'm one of the 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism. One of the 22 million black people who are the victims of democracy, nothing but disguised hypocrisy. So, I'm not standing here speaking to you as an American, or a patriot, or a flag-saluter, or a flag-waver—no; not I. I'm speaking as a victim of this American system. And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare. (Malcolm X 1964: 26).

Here we detect several notable features. First, there is the utilisation of *paradiastole*,[29] per which traditional signifiers of virtue ('patriot') are reinscribed as vice—being a good American actually indicates complicity in persecution of non-white citizens. Similarly, 'democracy' stands not for a universal creed but a duplicitous exercise of exclusion and exploitation against those whose ancestors were brought to the US as slaves. Moreover, the gesture of throwing aside the patriotic veil, exposing the nightmarish contours of the American 'dream,' also provides rallying point for fellow victims. What is not conveyed explicitly in the transcript of this speech are the 'call and response' interjections by the increasingly impassioned audience (declamatory assertions of "That's right!" "Speak!"). *Pace* King's 'Dream' imagery, there is no 'table of brotherhood' around which the 'sons of former slaves' and the 'sons of former slave owners,' will be able to meet—for Malcolm X there is only the realisation that the 'table' is a manipulative unattainable ideal, a vision of equality forever placed in the distant future, forever out of reach.

I am wary of projecting 'cynical' intentions onto actors who do not self-identify with the term, but I believe it is still possible to isolate certain statements as resonating with the invidiousness ascriptions of cynical speech. Notable slogans ("Hands up, Don't Shoot!" "I can't breathe!") during the early days of Black Lives Matter took the form of mock pleadings directed at police officers,[30] rhetoric that was distinctly unlike the speeches, slogans, and song titles that were prominent among the 1960s generation of Civil Rights activists ("We shall overcome" "I have a dream" "I am a man"). The formulations of BLM are structured as provocations and were reliably met with brutalising defensiveness on the part of local officials and law enforcement. When protestors chant "black lives *matter*," the redundancy and self-evidence of the statement stands as an indictment of the patently unequal legal status of non-white American citizens. BLM is not a conventional protest movement cohering around a central leadership. Their demands were not for the repeal of particular laws or other piecemeal improvements (aside from the seemingly reasonable request to "Stop killing us.") This was not a fight against Jim Crow Laws but a more universal indictment of 'normal,' everyday law enforcement, and the wider public's ignorance and lassitude towards egregious abuses of power. In this, BLM proved remarkably effective in provoking local law enforcement to reveal their true faces, via heavy-handed policing, and the treatment of unarmed citizens as an existential *threat* to Baltimore, Ferguson, Sacramento, Chicago, and elsewhere.

[29] Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*.
[30] Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*; Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter*.

In the intervening years, the slogans of Black Lives Matter have been subjected to similar pressures of domestication and monetisation, similar to the redemptive reading of Diogenes as a cosmopolitan universalist. No sooner had protestors expressed their 'unreasonable' demands to 'defund' the police (informed by their rightfully cynical contempt for the pageantry of police reform and retraining), efforts to defuse those demands quickly flooded mainstream media outlets.[31] At the same time, corporate advertisers and entrepreneurial grifters sought to transform slogans and demands into lucrative brand identifications.[32] Then as now, the potent functionality of cynical speech consists in the moment of subversive articulation, independent of the speaker's overall ideological outlook. Cynicism can manifest anywhere at any time because it consists of a set of practical functions rather than a system of thought or way of life. Whatever lasting resonances the destruction of reputations or toxification of meanings may have, the 'intent' of cynical utterances remains within the actual moment of smashing stalemated moral-political debates into rubble. With each appropriation and domestication of the cynical utterance, a novel formulation is found (or rediscovered), hence the progressive sharpening of BLM protests (particularly in the UK), from "I can't breathe!" to "All Cops Are Bastards".[33] The flexibility of cynical speech is marked by a willingness to use any rhetorical means necessary to undermine opponents and dissolve obstacles, which admittedly allows for ideological incoherence, incivility, and rank hypocrisy. Despite rejecting consensus and understanding as the ultimate goals of communication, cynical speech can be distinguished from covert manipulations of speech (such as lying or propaganda) because it targets and reformulates meaning in the open, rather than to secure some secondary aim or advantage. Cynical insinuations become enmeshed in the gaps between words and deeds, amplifying lurking doubts about what our words actually mean. In some instances, phrases are reduced to the cumulative evidence of their abuse (e.g. 'national security' and 'free speech'). In other cases, cynical speech catalyses the transformation of meaning by demonstrating the inherent vacuousness and pliability of certain meanings (e.g., 'human rights' under 'humanitarian' interventions; or the phrase 'fake news,' first used against Donald Trump in 2016 until it was adopted by the campaign to condemn all media as partisan; see Higdon 2020).

As the United States, along with the rest of the world, stares into the abyss of a second Trump presidency, it is worth remembering some of the cynical highlights from his first administration, which was treated at the time by many commentators as an unprecedented subversion of political discourse.[34] Alongside wearyingly familiar tropes of right-wing chauvinism[35], the Trump administration was particularly brazen in dismissing democratic norms themselves: as when the president's spokesperson, Kellyanne Conway, claimed the administration was generating 'alternative' facts[36]; or when the US Secretary

[31] Herrera, *The Defunding Debate*.

[32] Including a particularly infamous campaign by Pepsi, which saw police and protestors putting aside differences in the wake of Kendall Jenner offering an officer a can: www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/business/kendall-jenner-pepsi-ad.html.

[33] Gagliardo-Silver, *What I mean when I say I want to abolish the police*.

[34] Mercieca, *Demagogue for President*; Carpenter, *Gaslighting America*; Kakutani, *The Death of Truth*.

[35] Which has only gotten worse in the current campaign: Gibson, G. 2023. "Trump says immigrants are 'poisoning the blood of our country.' Biden campaign likens comments to Hitler," nbcnews.com

[36] Jaffe, Alexandra. 2017. "Kellyanne Conway: Whitehouse Spokesman Gave 'Alternative Facts' on Inauguration Crowd," www.nbcnews.com.

of State and former CIA director, Mike Pompeo, boasted in a commencement speech: "I was the CIA director. We lied, we cheated, we stole."[37]; or when, as a new candidate, Trump railed against the 'rigged' American electoral system whose representatives were all in the pocket of corporate lobbyists and elite donors like himself: "When they call, I give. And you know what, when I need something from them two years later, three years later, I call them. They are there for me. That's a broken system."[38] Trump's continuing appeal (despite obvious acts of criminality, incompetence, and probable treason) has been based on positioning himself as an outsider to the sclerotic, ineffective, morally debased political system. Importantly it does not seem to matter whether Trump is a beneficiary of that same system, or whether he is himself complicit in the abuses he decries. What 'matters' is that he does not ask his supporters to invest any faith in the system itself. Thus what distinguishes 'cynical' statements made by Trump from the countless instances of racist invective, nationalist chauvinism and outright lies is their peculiar alchemy of disingenuousness and provocativeness. The cynical speaker *knows* they are making a claim in 'bad faith' (even though there is always truth in what they say). The cynical speaker knows that *we know* their claim is designed to elicit an outraged response (by 'saying the quiet part aloud,' or wilfully misconstruing the intentions of an interlocutor). Most importantly of all, *we all know* that none of it matters—the speaker's utterance and the listener's reaction affirm a status quo they simultaneously recognise as not worth saving. Which is not to say everything carries on as before, because what often follows in the wake of 'effective' cynical speech is a subtle yet profound devaluation of conventional sources of legitimation, as when we come to accept the ubiquity of 'fake news' and the apparent fact that 'All Cops Are Bastards.'

The wry pessimism colouring cynical statements makes even revolution appear a sham ("If we want everything to remain as it is, everything must change," declares the guileful nephew Tancredi from *Il Gattopardo*). Whether consigned to the margins or comfortably ensconced inside corrupt, hypocritical institutions, cynical assertions are brazen in their publicness—as the powerful believe they can offend without consequence and the powerless feel they have nothing more to lose. Cynical speech never serves to placate and may actually hasten the end of an oppressive consensus; it thereby provides an unlikely impetus for collective learning, even if it does so by callously smashing faltering social beliefs into dust. Equally important to remember, cynical speech is never itself the ultimate source of moral rot, it is only the messenger, confirming what 'everybody knows.' Cynical speech is not 'effective' by virtue of sheer wantonness—it calls out hypocrisy and resignation and 'dares' listeners to either prove the cynic wrong or admit the need for fundamental change. What unites the cynical speech of a Diogenes and a Donald Trump is that the fact they seem to 'get away with' their provocation leads naturally to the conclusion that, in a truly 'just' society, they would not be able to get away with such statements—because in a truly 'just' society, such claims would be not only normatively undesirable but also factually untrue. Of course, cynical attacks have the potential to overlap with overtly racist or misogynistic slurs; cynical speech can also be said to unjustly caricature targeted groups ("*politicians* are all crooks," "*voters* are all suckers"). But it would be inaccurate to flatten all distinction between speech with cynical intent and

[37] Pompeo, Mike. 2015. "Why Diplomacy Matters" (Texas A&M University, April 15, 2019): https://www.state.gov/remarks-at-texas-am-wiley-lecture-series/.

[38] Ornitz, Jill and Struyk, Ryan. 2015. "Donald Trump's Surprisingly Honest Lessons About Big Money in Politics" www.abcnews.go.com.

hate speech, not least of all because cynicism never presumes the superiority of any particular group over another. Unlike propaganda or sloganeering, cynical speech serves to undermine confidence in ideal types *tout court*, especially those that provide the foundations for status hierarchies.

Cynical speech demonstrates the uses of moral language by perpetrating novel abuses. Some may recoil from the crudity or laziness of cynical assertions. Some may claim that cynical speech is ensnared in performative contradiction: upon what foundation can cynical derision anchor itself, aside from the very same critical and normative standards used by sincere social critics? Cynical speech succeeds at pulling the rug out from under communicative reason, demonstrating the normative groundlessness of language by subverting meanings and standards before our very eyes. Cynical speech effectuates the ruin of communicative contexts by any means necessary, using any words, at any volume, against any target, accompanied by any number of offensive gestures or sounds. Cynical speech presents a particular linguistic manoeuvre, manifesting the exception that *disproves* the rule. While we can argue whether this resolute negativity is desirable or justifiable or conducive to civil peace, such concerns are tangential to the functionality of cynicism itself.

3. Cynicism as Preparation for Radical Uncertainty

> *[6.63] Asked what he got out of philosophy, he said, "If nothing else, I'm prepared for whatever happens."*[39]

On November 7th, 2024, two days after Trump's re-election, the Copernicus Climate Change Service (a division of the European Commission's space programme) published a report stating that the past year was the first time global average temperatures reached 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.[40] According to the UN Refugee Agency, the global number of internally displaced persons seeking respite from drought, floods, wildfires, and agricultural collapse already averages between 20 and 30 million people per year—and when we factor in those fleeing political violence and war, this number rises to over 70 million.[41] In the present moment, most First World nations appear incapable of mounting any cooperative endeavour to address accelerated climate change, meaningfully defending human rights, or policing multinational corporations. In the absence of existential stability or political transparency, cynicism encourages self-transparency and personal integrity against circumstances beyond our control. While the power of cynical speech specifically exists wholly within the moment of insulting enunciation, its affirmative powerlessness speaks to an increasingly widely experience of heteronomy and powerlessness:

> "I try to not let my status keep me from doing the things I want to do. Probably the scariest thing I've done was coming out [as a lesbian] to my parents. Once I did that, I felt I could do anything. I don't want to regret things later on. Sure, I could be picked

[39] Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, p. 288.
[40] https://climate.copernicus.eu/year-2024-set-end-warmest-record
[41] https://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/stories/climate-change-and-displacement-myths-and-facts https://www.internal-displacement.org/global-report/grid2023/

> up by ICE just walking out my door, but I could also die from some random illness. That shouldn't stop me from having a full life. Besides, I don't want to give them [immigration authorities] the satisfaction of knowing they control me." ('Sylvia,' undocumented immigrant living in U.S.)[42]

What might be misconstrued as fatalism or bravado can also be understood as an effective means of coping under hegemonic authority. Here, the speaker equates the danger from aggressive border policing with a more generalised existential condition of risk. For context, this interview dates from a time when the US 'Dream Act' for naturalising the children of undocumented immigrants was still a remote possibility. Today, in light of the rejection of immigration amnesties by both major parties, and in light of the incoming Trump administration's enthusiastic endorsement of mass deportations,[43] it would seem the only rational response for those who are stateless or undocumented is to abandon all hope in political solutions, to affirm their undeserved 'illegality,' and seek new strategies to help them cope within a perpetual legal purgatory.

Given the ominous portents that face us today, it seems more and more of us will be forced to acclimatise to modes of political agency defined by displacement, uncertainty, and powerlessness. Such conditions can be likened to the heteronomous character of life under authoritarian rule, where one is constantly at risk of sudden, violent upheaval. But in the view of theorists like Lisa Wedeen, 'cynical' acclimations to tyrannical circumstances are not any solution, her own focus being life under the al-Assad regime in Syria.[44] This is because apathetic and purely performative obedience (acting 'as if' one supports a leader in order to simply be left in peace), can never produce actual freedom—it only affirms a subtler disciplining, depoliticising effect upon agency, whereby rebellion is not so much crushed as it is slowly bled of vital emancipatory interest.[45] After a stagnating 10-year war, Wedeen still sees a vitiating quality in any mode of agency that is not sincerely invested in the overthrow of a tyrannical regime.[46] Cynically 'irreverent' attitudes towards official messaging by the regime has proven no more effective than the insurgency to break the cycle of 'compliance inducement,' per which the ruling power absorbs counter-hegemonic challenges until the opposition if exhausted and the general populace yearns for stability of any lasting kind. [47] At best non-conventional subversion can be left to satire which may offer. a mode of "detachment…from aspects of life that are harmful and can be better imagined otherwise".[48] I have argued against the dismissal of cynicism as a mode of political agency because I believe it affords both short-term and lasting alternatives to nihilistic resignation, denialism, and violent revanchism for a political world increasingly dominated by pathetic-but-dangerous authoritarian regimes despite over a decade of unprecedented mass mobilisations in the name of democratic revolution.[49]

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[42] Interview: Roberto G. Gonzales. 2016. *Lives in Limbo: Undocumented and Coming of Age in America*. University of California Press.

[43] Ventura, J. 2024 "Trump says there's no 'price tag' on his deportation proposal," www.thehill.com (07.11.24)

[44] Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*; Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions*.

[45] Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, p. 147.

[46] Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions*.

[47] Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions*, p. ix.

[48] Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions*, p. 75.

[49] For an incisive critique of the legacy of the global justice movement and its model of 'horizontal' leaderless mass mobilisations, see: Vincent Bevins (2023); My defence of cynicism as a more

I believe cynicism deserves consideration as a constructive mode of contending with a political world and existential horizon spiralling out of human control. Diogenes's supposed exile and abduction into slavery were not the direct result of his outrageous actions, those came later; if anything, his Cynicism was an expression of having nothing more to lose. At the other socioeconomic extreme, Donald Trump's inheritance of his father's real estate empire insulated him from having to apologise for his obvious lack of business acumen, aesthetic taste, and basic social decency. In either case, cynicism has a uniquely 'affirmative' character.

Conclusion

To summarise, I have described cynical speech as invidious ascription—an unfair, unbecoming, and unworthy manipulation of meaning through which a communicative context is *ruined*, to the point that it can no longer proceed as normal. I have tried to attend to some of the unique modalities of cynicism—as a mode of creatively antagonistic speech; as a conscious affirmation of status; as an orientation to future uncertainty. I have contrasted cynicism to more conventional notions of democratic agency, and the presumption that respectful debate, coalition building, progressive legislative reform and peaceful protest offer an exhaustive range of legitimate political expressions. These preferred processes are all too easily abandoned in the wake of any major election upset (not just in the US), when the established class of commentators begin to veer wildly between apologetic idealism and nihilistic condemnation.[50] First world democracies facing upsurges of reactionary populism and hostility towards establishment elite are all too quick to present outcomes in starkly apocalyptic terms ("the most critical election for the future of the country; that the wrong result will unleash a fascist regime").

Where do these grave warnings or belligerent assertions of supremacy leave us? How is an emotional investment in the glory of a national legacy (whichever part of that past we at inclined to elevate) more rational or reasonable than the cynical assessment that it was all for nothing, and we must find new pathways for building trust and living morally. Cynical affirmation consists in bending the rules to benefit one's moral community rather than shaping one's identity around the established model of good citizenship; cynicism does not seek inclusion, because the prior communal actions or marginalisation and persecution proves the moral undesirability of that inclusion. When we consider the *earned* vacuousness of formulations like 'presidential authority,' 'national security,' 'collective wisdom,' 'humanitarian intervention,' or 'free markets,' we see that the revaluations of their meaning are not necessarily driven by developments in political or socioeconomic structures (as when the 'divine right of kings' gradually gave way to notions of national sovereignty); nor is the devaluation of norms always a result of concerted

localised form of coping within deficient social systems is itself informed by loss of faith in the model of 'revolution' upheld by various 'Occupy' movements and the Arab Spring. These movements expressed an abiding faith in the possible redemption and democratisation of existing political systems, a faith that appears to have been largely misplaced, and which underestimated the capacity for co-optation and fragmentation from within.

[50] Johnson, A. 2024. "Democratic Elites Blame Everyone But Themselves for Historic Collapse (On the blame list: transgender people, economic headwinds, ontologically racist voters—anyone but the powerful people tasked with defeating Trump)" www.inthesetimes.com.

propaganda campaigns or ideological assault, as when the provisioning of social welfare by states gave way to a rhetoric of state retrenchment, and the pathologisation of 'government waste'.[51]

While politically influential operatives, like Vladimir Putin's former chief of staff Vladislav Sirkov, or Donald Trump's previous campaign advisor Steven Bannon, have made a profession out of manipulatively steering public discourse, I think it is misleading to equate demagogic machinations with 'everyday' eruptions of cynical speech, in which avowed ideals and the eminent status of leaders is gradually weighted down by continued demonstrations of fraud and hypocrisy.[52] Cynical speech need not inject such doubts unilaterally, as it often forms in *reaction* to moral contamination, for which a perfectly reasonable response is to push faltering ideals and damaged reputations over the edge. Here we might distinguish cynical disparagement from disenchanted, 'ironic' humour, such as the popular, largely anonymous genre of *anecdoty* that was a prominent feature of late Soviet culture (example: "What is the difference between a Soviet pessimist and a Soviet optimist? A Soviet pessimist thinks that things can't possibly get any worse, but a Soviet optimist thinks that they will";[53]). Cynical statements tend to be of a more personalised, vituperative quality, which stands to ruin a particular communicative context. While a cynical statement can gain its rhetorical strength from humour, gossip or surmise, its effectiveness is attributable to the truthful resonances underlying the speaker's obvious bad faith.

In closing, I want to make clear that my attempt to secure a surer foothold for understanding cynicism and its effects is not an attempt to discover 'one true authentic' Cynicism against which alleged manifestations can measured. I was motivated by a concern that our continued use of this particular artefact from Attic Greek holds a troublesome ambiguity, by which 'cynicism' is made to refer *both* to the provocations of the cynic *and* the prevailing circumstances of ineptitude, immorality, and injustice from which it arises. My contention is that cynicism encapsulates a unique species of manipulative speech—but this does not make it inherently pathological, parasitic, or detrimental for genuine moral-political understanding. Whether it proceeds in an overtly provocative or subtly subversive manner, cynicism shatters the 'objectivity' of our political world, corrodes the trustworthiness of vacuous ideals, and undermines respect for statuses that do not reflect actual human needs. I have offered a number of brief sketches in which cynical responses are clearly 'rational,' given the circumstances, even when driven by less-than-salubrious motives. I would push even further to suggest that cynical derision, provocation, and invidious ascription are *indispensable supplements* to the normal 'binding and bonding' effects of communicative interaction and consensus. Indeed, the "low road" of insincere provocation can prove as vital for normative insight and creativity as the "high road" of well-mannered consensus-seeking to which we so often try—and fail—to adhere.

[51] Stanley, *How Propaganda Works*.
[52] Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible*.
[53] Yurchak, Al*Everything was Forever, Until it was No More*, p. 280.

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