



# The Making of Modern Cynicism

By David Mazella

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## The Making of Modern Cynicism By David Mazella

Once describing a life of exile, self-denial, physical rigor, and mastery of one's desires, cynicism now describes a life of political quietism, passivity, and moral indifference, representing not a weakening of ancient philosophic norms but rather their inversion. In *The Making of Modern Cynicism*, David Mazella asks: how did ancient Cynic philosophy come to provide a name for its modern, unphilosophical counterpart, and what events caused such a dramatic reversal of cynicism's former meanings? He traces the concept of cynicism from its origins as a philosophical way of life in Greek antiquity through its successive transformations in the early modern and Enlightenment periods and into the nineteenth century when it took its distinctively modern, unreflective form as a variety of disenchantment, disbelief, or distrust.

Sampling a wide variety of literary, philosophical, and historical writings, Mazella documents the transition of the cynic from an ascetic philosopher to any person whose "faded belief or curdled trust had left him unfit for attachments to others." Even more important, Mazella questions why cynicism should provoke such hand-wringing from cultural critics when it has been a stable, recognized, even routine feature of modern politics for the better part of 150 years. Arguing that modern cynics inspire powerful reactions by envisaging a future without hope of meaningful change, he then suggests that we address popular cynicism in more effective, less moralistic ways. Rather than dismissing cynicism as an irrational attitude of distrust or fatalism, or chiding cynics for their persistent disbelief, Mazella contends that analyzing cynicism can reveal the unacknowledged limits of current political argument, a crucial first step toward developing the kinds of reasoned persuasion necessary for more meaningful and substantive forms of political change.

Well-written and engaging, *The Making of Modern Cynicism* will appeal not only to readers in literary and cultural criticism but also to those interested in political theory and the history of philosophy.

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## Editorial Review

### Review

Mazella's genealogical analysis of 'cynicism' illuminates the literary, philosophical, and political history of this concept, casting a particularly rich light on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Mazella's book also contributes to the discussion of cynicism in contemporary politics, offering the ancient and early modern Cynic?the Diogenes figure?as a partial antidote to what cynicism has become in an age of media saturation. Written in a lively, accessible style, *The Making of Modern Cynicism* should be of interest to a broad academic audience.

(Adam Potkay, The College of William and Mary)

"[A] tour de force of scholarship and an argument whose complex components work like clockwork to illuminate the changing facets of cynicism.... This book's elegant prose, its learning, and its careful parsing of philosophical position with rhetorical strategy enable the reader to absorb the twists and turns of the fortunes of cynicism with a sense of lively engagement.... It has been a long time since I have read a book that left me feeling so nourished, so grateful, so optimistic."

(*The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*)

The book's argument takes us from Diogenes and his reception in the ancient world, through the early modern English appropriation of the figure of Diogenes, to the crucial example of Rousseau as the hinge upon which the ancient and modern version of cynicisms turn and the Burkean counter-Enlightenment reaction to Rousseau. Mazella then turns to the development of a form of cynicism related to dandyism in the late nineteenth century and closes with an epilogue on the use of cynicism as a critical political resource today. If they confined themselves to reading the Rousseau and Burke chapters, scholars in eighteenth century studies would be rewarded with extraordinary insights, but they would miss out on a tour de force of scholarship and an argument whose complex components work like clockwork to illuminate the changing facets of cynicism. More than that, Mazella's view of each age through the prism of these transformations turns out to afford a precise analysis of what is most significant in the intellectual debates of the time.

(Molly Anne Rothenberg, Tulane University *Eighteenth Century Theory and Interpretation*)

"As social historians and cultural studies specialists have demonstrated, once you study enough five-year periods closely you are ready to make revisionary observations about movements and change. The number of intellectual histories may be this year's preeminent harbinger of the future. That they are published by presses not established as eighteenth-century powerhouses reinforces the sense that this is a movement. Mazella's *The Making of Modern Cynicism* is an ambitious study stretching from Diogenes to modern politics. His engaging introduction sets the stage for a challenging examination of 'cynicism' that embraces its contradictions and humankind's ambivalences toward it" (749)

(Paula R. Backscheider *SEL*)

*The Making of Modern Cynicism* is an encyclopedic story of semantic and cultural sea change. Mazella shows how the 'Cynicism' of the ancient world, represented by the shadowy but powerful figure of Diogenes, turns into the watered-down 'cynicism' of the present. Along the way are some surprises: Oscar Wilde is predictably present, but so are Beau Brummell and even Jane Austen. An eye-opening account.

(W. B. Carnochan, Emeritus, Stanford University)

About the Author

David Mazella is Associate Professor in the Department of English at the University of Houston.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Thomas Paris:**

Book is to be different for every grade. Book for children till adult are different content. As you may know that book is very important normally. The book *The Making of Modern Cynicism* seemed to be making you to know about other expertise and of course you can take more information. It is quite advantages for you. The reserve *The Making of Modern Cynicism* is not only giving you far more new information but also to get your friend when you experience bored. You can spend your current spend time to read your guide. Try to make relationship with all the book *The Making of Modern Cynicism*. You never experience lose out for everything in the event you read some books.

#### **Ruth Santiago:**

Exactly why? Because this *The Making of Modern Cynicism* is an unordinary book that the inside of the reserve waiting for you to snap this but latter it will shock you with the secret it inside. Reading this book next to it was fantastic author who also write the book in such amazing way makes the content inside of easier to understand, entertaining way but still convey the meaning fully. So , it is good for you because of not hesitating having this any more or you going to regret it. This amazing book will give you a lot of advantages than the other book get such as help improving your ability and your critical thinking way. So , still want to postpone having that book? If I ended up you I will go to the guide store hurriedly.

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**Lynn Hardie:**

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