

Ancient Cynicism: a case for Post-Western salvage.

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It has been said many times before but some clichés are always worth repeating. It is only when a concept falls into question that we begin to realise how heavily we have all been relying upon it. This holds true too for the West which, to use an old poststructuralist term, has recently been placed *under erasure* for a number of reasons¹. Of course we already know that the West has frequently had intimations of its own mortality ever since Spengler². We also take care to remember Derrida's playful note that adopting the apocalyptic tone is a very old tradition in Western thought³. Nevertheless, let us assume that it is prudent to examine our contemporary post-western intimations carefully in a sober fashion rather than dismiss them out of hand. In this spirit of open minded enquiry, let us briefly survey some of the more common contemporary '*West under erasure*' discourses which are clearly pertinent to the study of the world political economy.

First of all we could identify that loss of semantic anchoring in geopolitics which came with all the fallout from the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the East/West dichotomy. When the old Soviet East dissolved itself and formally renounced Communism, the narrative goes, it did something truly terrible to the West. It deprived us of the enemy upon which our collective imaginary sense of Western community and meaning had grown to depend after so many decades of struggle. With the fall of the bi-polar world, many thought, the world would be in danger of breaking down into a multi-polar world. The old differences and rivalries which had previously been willingly suppressed under the pragmatic necessities of the Cold War would now reassert themselves⁴.

For some commentators, during the 1990's, this prediction was confirmed by various indicators of divergence within the Western alliance. The earliest intimations of this were perhaps the in the 'low politics' of various trade disputes between the USA and Europe under the auspices of the WTO. This was followed by the 'high politics' of disquiet over the US decision to exercise its right of veto to prevent Boutros-Boutros Ghali from a second term as Secretary General of the UN. The ongoing reluctance of the USA to comply with obligations with regard to the budgets of the IMF, the World Bank and the United Nations, also began to fuel doubts in Europe about the durability of the American commitment to the post-45 Atlantic Charter set of regimes we often call multilateralism. The way that decisions over the expansion of NATO were handled, together with emerging tensions within NATO

¹ To put a word *under erasure* is to employ the deconstructive strategy of crossing it out, but keeping both the word and its erasure embedded within the text. This practice, first employed by Heidegger, then popularised by Derrida, draws attention to the equivocal status of the word whilst retaining the semantic work of representation it serves in the text. See Vincent B. Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism* (London, Hutchinson, 1983), p.171.

² Spengler, *The End of the West* (London, Allen & Urwin, 1932).

³ Derrida, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy', *Oxford Literary Review* 1984

⁴ Mearsheimer, J., 'Back to the Future: Instability After the Cold War', *International Security*, 1990. 15 (1), p.5-56.

arising from the humanitarian crisis over Bosnia and Kosovo, added further to an uneasy consciousness of the potential for the US and its Western allies to drift apart⁵.

All these concerns were put into perspective after the turn of the millennium with the election and inauguration of the Republican administration of George W. Bush. The decision to disengage from the Kyoto Protocol, to abandon the ICC, to abrogate the ABM treaty, together with the sheer bluntness with which these shifts were presented to the world, made it clear that American foreign policy had changed significantly. Initially, though these unilateralist moves caused widespread concern, they were generally fielded by international diplomacy in such a way that they did not immediately appear to threaten our sense of collective belonging. Of course there will always be differences within the Western alliance, went the mainstream refrain, but just because transatlantic relations were going through a difficult phase does not mean that we were suffering the kind of rupture that would challenge our conception of the West itself.

This confidence was slightly shaken by all the fallout from 9/11. The Bush declaration of war on terror, the Bush doctrine attempting to legitimate the act of pre-emptive military action, rendition and the more or less open violation of the Human Rights Charter from the top, or very near the top, and of course the bitter controversy within the Security Council over the use of force for regime change in Iraq, together with the incompetence of the military occupation which followed, all appeared to give some credence to the view that something vital to the coherence of the Western alliance was being torn asunder. There was a sense on both sides of the Atlantic that fissures were opening up between the US West and the European West that were becoming wide enough for it to be hard to see any easy way back.

More recently of course there have been many attempts to repair the damage done to transatlantic relations during 2002 and 2003. Some have argued that it has been realised in Washington that unilateral US foreign policies have been producing what the regime theorists call *sub-optimal outcomes*. Therefore, as the tide of opinion in America turns against the military occupation of Iraq, it is possible that the political pendulum is swinging back toward an appreciation of the virtues of multilateral diplomacy again. Meanwhile the waves of anti-American sympathies in Europe triggered by the controversy over Iraq may be giving way to a more pragmatic view that Europe still needs to work with the US, given that it still the greatest power on earth. Once the neo-conservatives in Washington are finally discredited and swept from power, it has been intimated, many formerly alienated Europeans will be free once again to remember how much they share a common history, a core set of western values, and also some vital interests with the great majority of people in America.

Nevertheless, some doubts remain. Though one should never underestimate the healing power of forgetting, some important taboos were broken and some harsh words were spoken during the early days of controversy over Iraq. Previously, transatlantic differences and conflicts, however deeply felt, have usually been smoothed over with mutual expressions of longer term alliance and a common determination to overcome. And so, when Robert Kagan announced that it was ‘time

⁵ The mood of many commentators in Europe in the late 90’s was caught well by Charles William Maynes, ‘US unilateralism and its dangers’, *Review of International Studies*, 1999, 25, 515-518.

to stop pretending that Europeans and Americans share a common view of the world, or even that they occupy the same world’, many of us interpreted this as a ‘Melian dialogue’ moment⁶. We knew that Kagan mixed in influential circles, and so when he informed the world that the ‘reasons for the divide’ between Europe and America ‘are deep, long in development, and likely to endure’, we also knew that an important section of the US power elite have at the very least flirted with this sentiment⁷. And having toyed with this stance once, it will be easier to break the taboo again in future upon the next provocation.

It would be easy to dismiss the significance of Kagan’s celebrated example of allowing the mask to slip. The article caught our attention in the heat of the moment because of its provocative tone and memorable rhetoric. It was something for the pundits and columnists to chatter about for a while. That is all. However, the words are still there on the page. For a short time, during the months immediately before and after the invasion, something important in the construction and management of international reality seemed to slip.

Of course most of us hope that liberal America will be able to renew itself again and deliver us from the Martian world which Kagan and his colleagues were so keen to inflict upon us. But few would place any long term bets upon this, partly because so many of our liberal American friends with whom we break bread with are also despondent about the state of things back home and do not fancy the odds much either. There may well be significant periods of remission for the spirit of the West hovering over the Atlantic, but somehow we cannot bring ourselves to take it for granted in the way that many of us did in the past. There is a residual sense that the Atlantic has grown wider and that the two continents have moved further apart. This then is the first discourse which has seriously contemplated the possibility of the *West under erasure*. As Moisi recently anticipated it: ‘does the West still exist? Have we moved from a world with two Europe’s and one West to a world with one Europe and two West’s?’⁸

A second *West under erasure* discourse clusters around the asserted prospect of an Eastern eclipse of the West in the 21st century. Early representations of this broke surface during the 1980’s, when people began to draw attention to the rise of Japan as an economic power and speculate about the political implications of this ascent. During the 1990’s, when the hyperbole surrounding the Japanese ‘economic miracle’ began to falter against the experience which became known as Japan’s ‘lost decade’, the genre diversified. People began to talk instead about the ‘Asian miracle’, the ‘Pacific rim’ and the rise of ‘tiger economies’ such as South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia.

After the Asian financial crisis of 1997, the genre morphed again and attention shifted onto the economic rise of China and India. In this reformulation of the ‘rise of the East’ discourse, however, the dramatic profile of the debates clustering within it

⁶ I refer of course to the famous passages in Thucydides where the embassy from Athens gets to enlighten the Citizens of Melos about the real deal. *History of the Peloponnesian War* (London, Penguin, 1972), pp.400-408.

⁷ Robert Kagan, ‘Power and Weakness: Why the United States and Europe see the world differently’, *Policy Review*, 2002, July-August, No.113.

⁸ Moisi, D., ‘Reinventing the West’, *Foreign Affairs*, 2003, Vol.82, Issue 6, p.67.

were elevated significantly, due to the fact that China and India are both indisputably significant players in the world theatre of international security. When the ‘rise of the East’ discourse was mainly about Japan or the Asian Tigers during the 1980’s and 90’s, debates about the implications of this tended to confine themselves to the ‘low politics’ of trade policy and international economics, because these nations were perceived as being suzerain to the USA as far as world security was concerned from the early days of the Cold War in the Pacific. With the perceived rise of China and India as economic world powers in the 21st century, however, the ‘rise of the East’ transformed itself from a *politics of international economics* to a *politics of world order* issue, because China and India are now perceived as being emerging *economic* and *military* world powers⁹. Rightly or wrongly, Western commentary has worried over the increased economic capacity of China to invest in the modernization of its military capacity, and the security dilemma issues this poses for its potential rivals such as India and Japan regionally and thus, by the logical extension of things given the structure of world politics, for the West itself.

In some quarters then, the rise of China and India could be the greatest upheaval in world politics since the USA and Japan entered the world stage as great powers to challenge European hegemony a century or more ago. In this respect the West is held to be *under erasure* in the sense that it is faced with the challenge of having to re-orientate itself to a new world order which is taking shape. A power shift is taking place, according to this narrative, in which the centre of gravity in the world political economy is moving toward the East. The implications of this are not only conventional in the sense that it raises predictable new-world-order type questions over whether China, for example, will turn out to be a status-quo power or a rather more troublesome revisionist power¹⁰. The implications are also unconventional in the sense that the rise of the East raises questions about what we have previously often packed into our category of the West itself¹¹.

Formerly, the onward march of globalisation was often conceived in terms of Westernization or ‘the triumph of the West’. Modernity was thought to have emerged first in Europe and only subsequently disseminated throughout the rest of the world. Thus conceived, Western modernity was an indivisible export package comprised of capitalism, liberty, democracy, the nation-state, class struggle and socialism, science and technology¹². Modernity was thus a historical process that was destined to make all traditional world societies more like the West. Therefore, whether you were on the political right or the left (another Western dichotomy possibly under erasure), the West was always already in the vanguard of progress. With the rise of the East, however, and the spectacular growth of capitalism and nationalism ‘with Chinese or Asian characteristics’, the identity of modernity as a Western phenomenon appears to fragment under the weight of globalisation. In an ironic twist to the old adage that it is the victors who get to write the history books, history suddenly discovers that the

⁹ William A. Callahan, ‘How to understand China: the dangers and opportunities of being a rising power’, *Review of International Studies*, 2005, 31, 701-714. Arthur Waldron, ‘The rise of China: military and political implications’, *Review of International Studies*, 2005, 31, 715-733.

¹⁰ Alastair Iain Johnston, ‘Is China a Status Quo Power?’, *International Security*, 2003, 27, 4, 5-56.

¹¹ Jack Goody, *The East in the West* (Cambridge, CUP, 1996).

¹² J.M. Blaut, *The Colonizer’s Model of the World: Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (NY & London, Guildford Press, 1993).

‘European miracle’ was just another phase in the development of capitalism¹³. In another ironic twist, the West appears to lose its ability to define the future of modernity or set its agenda. To our bewilderment, modernity appears to give up on the West and, in a curious reversal of the modernization literature of the 50’s and 60’s, we are politely informed it is the West that stands in danger of falling behind and becoming obsolete. In order to compete in the 21st century capitalist world political economy, many neo-liberal politicians and economists tell us, it is the West that will have to shape up and learn to stop clinging to the inefficiencies of tradition. This then, is the second *West under erasure* discourse. We could summarise it as an Eastern eclipse that not only destabilises western conceptions of world order, but also erodes the semantic foundations of our conception of the West itself.

A third *West under erasure* discourse has to do with our steadily accumulating consciousness of environmental degradation and its impact on what might be regarded as the last redoubt of Western self-esteem: its extraordinary wealth. In the opening lines of *The Rise of the Western World*, North and Thomas managed to encapsulate this sense of the West perfectly:

‘The affluence of Western man is a new and unique phenomenon. In the past several centuries he has broken loose from the shackles of a world bound by abject poverty and recurring famine and has realised a quality of life which is made possible only by relative abundance. This book explains that unique historical achievement, the rise of the Western World.’¹⁴

Historians have debated for decades over the puzzle of this unique achievement. How was it possible for the West to conquer and dominate the rest of the world through settlement, trade, capital accumulation, empire, knowledge and technology? How did it manage to create the first international system of norms, rules and institutions to span the globe? And how did the West manage to overturn the former economic hegemony of the orient and fashion the first world political economy in its own image?

Many of the mainstream explanations focus on how Europe is supposed to have developed, during the late Middle-Ages, a unique set of cultural, political and economic characteristics. It was the dynamic virtue of these special characteristics, once they managed to break free from the constraints of feudalism, it has been argued, which enabled the relative success of the West in terms wealth and consequently of power¹⁵. The West became rich and powerful, in other words, because its peoples were the first-comers who autonomously developed the internal cultural, political and economic relations which gave them all a decisive advantage. The good news, by implication, is that this Western success story can be emulated by all the other people living on the planet who have the will to do so. Sadly, the third *West under erasure* discourse argues that this achievement turns out to be a tragic misjudgement. Ironically, just when many Eastern powers seem to have assimilated the proper

¹³ Andre Gunder Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998). Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony* (Oxford, OUP, 1989). J.M. Blaut, *Eight Eurocentric Historians* (NY & London, Guilford Press, 2000).

¹⁴ North & Thomas, *The Rise of the Western World* (Cambridge, CUP, 1973), p.1.

¹⁵ E. L. Jones, *The European Miracle* (Cambridge, CUP, 1981). But such views are still perfectly contemporary. For example see: David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* (New York, Norton, 1999).

principles and norms of wealth creation and have started to apply them successfully, they transmute into a Western pathology which could lead the world into an abyss¹⁶.

A gathering body of evidence over the past two or three decades casts the economic achievements of the West over the past four centuries in a sombre light. Where the old narrative held out the economic miracle of the West as the pioneering example of progress which showed the world the future, the new narrative suggests instead that the rise of the West was a special case, due to exceptionally favourable ecological circumstances which are not likely to be repeated again¹⁷. During the 17th and 18th centuries, according to this narrative, there were surprising parallels between the East and West in terms of internal cultural, economic and political preconditions which could have enabled sustained economic growth and the concomitant growth of state power in either region. The decisive difference which made the great economic divergence between the West and the East possible, apparently, was the good fortune of the West in being able to transcend the ecological constraints of the European continent through the exploitation of the seemingly inexhaustible resources of the frontier world in the colonies. Without the ecological relief provided by the colonies in terms of emigration, timber, metals, grain, fish, sugar and cotton, the accumulation boom enjoyed by the West would have run up against exactly the same environmental constraints experienced by China. The economic achievements of the mercantile West during the 17th and 18th centuries is thus primarily due, according to this perspective, to a dramatic expansion of its ecological footprint across the globe through the ‘ghost acres’ it had managed to secure and exploit in those years. This ecological debt to the world was then compounded during the 19th century, when the West discovered that energy scarcity could be dispelled by the use of coal. Western Europe was blessed with reserves of coal located near to sources of potential demand. China, meanwhile, had plentiful reserves of coal, but prohibitively remote from potential sources of demand. Therefore, during the industrial revolution, the West acquired the habit of resource intensive, labour saving forms of economic development, primarily based upon the technology of steam locomotion. Meanwhile East Asia’s economy lapsed into a relatively stagnant phase of low growth based upon biosphere resource saving paths of economic development, by force of ecological necessity. Then, during the 20th century, led by the example of the then oil rich USA, the West switched its dependency upon hydrocarbons to oil. And then the barons struck oil in the Middle East. The story continues...

In sum, according to the third *West under erasure* discourse, the celebrated achievements of the West in terms of wealth are dependent upon an economic model of using new lands and biological resources ‘discovered’ outside Europe, and by the accelerating depletion of hydrocarbon energy resources under the earth’s crust that have taken our planet billions of years to accumulate. Consequently, the West is under erasure because it is based upon a political economy which is unsustainable. Unless we are prepared to succumb to space cadet fantasies more appropriate in science fiction than in the social sciences, there are no more ‘new worlds’ out there for us to discover where fresh resources are waiting to be squandered. Only the Arctic regions

¹⁶ Wolfgang Sachs (ed), *The Development Dictionary* (London & NJ, Zed Books, 1992), p.2.

¹⁷ Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton, PUP, 2000). Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: the biological expansion of Europe 900-1900* (Cambridge, CUP, 1986). Andrew Simms, *Ecological Debt: the health of the planet and the wealth of nations* (London, Pluto, 2005).

remain as the last global commons, and we shall soon see how much wealth really lies there. Meanwhile, the scientific consensus has settled upon the advice that growing dependency on burning hydrocarbons is the major contributor to climate change¹⁸. From this perspective then, the economic ‘rise of the East’ is merely a case of states like China and India attempting to make the same mistakes as the West long after the ecological window of opportunity to follow has begun to close. Sadly, resource intensive wealth creation is something that cannot be democratised. The Western economic miracle, if applied globally, turns into a Frankenstein recipe for ecocide.

Of course in many influential circles it is still argued with genuine conviction that with the right economic policies, our resource-intensive-global-warming West can be reformed into a resource-lite-carbon-neutral West. Through environmental regimes that channel the redirection of investment into the technologies of exploiting renewable resources, recycling, and resource efficient production and transportation methods, we can sustain the western material way of life and continue to propagate it globally too. The more critical view is that this is a classic case of the triumph of hope over experience and that there are basically three options: 1) do nothing and wait to see if the Green Cassandra’s are right or wrong; 2) attempt to implement a tin hat policy of ecological apartheid, with a resource intensive economy for the few and a resource poor plus environmentally degraded life for the many; 3) attempt a consensual policy of contraction and convergence, involving a post-Western downsizing of material aspirations in the West and a leapfrogging by the rest of the world which skips modernity in favour of a post-modern convergence with the post-western West¹⁹. Each of these options will probably hurt, because faith in economic progress has become the heart and soul of the modern West. It is the sacred altar upon which almost everything we do has traditionally been legitimated, and so the loss of it will be hard to bear²⁰.

There is also a fourth *West under erasure* discourse which we might call the decline and fall of the Classics. This discourse normally lies well beyond the gaze of international political theory, so in the interests of broadening our horizons we shall discuss it at some length here. In countless educational institutions across Europe and America, and in many educational institutions across the world founded or inspired by Western models, a special place has traditionally been dedicated to research and study into the ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome. This place was venerated by many in universities across the West because it was commonly accepted that it had a special role in the reproduction of Western identity. Western culture was held to be based upon the dual foundations of Judeo-Christian spirituality and the classical civilisations of Greece and Rome. Engagement with the literature, languages and art of Greece and Rome was highly valued because it was recognised that the Enlightenment had also been steeped in knowledge of the Western Classics from their very conception²¹. The secular tradition in thought that evolved into what we now know as the sciences, rationalism, ethics and normative theory, could thus trace its roots back into a pagan antiquity that could be authentically characterised as being Western. Indeed the very

¹⁸ *The IPCC 4th Assessment Report* at <http://www.ipcc.ch>. Also Nicholas Stern, *The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review* (Cambridge, CUP, 2007).

¹⁹ Wolfgang Sachs et al, *Fair Future* (

²⁰ Jose Maria Sbert, ‘Progress’, in Wolfgang Sachs (ed), *The Development Dictionary* (London, Zed Books, 1992).

²¹ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment*

tradition of a division between the 'West and the rest' was something that the Classicists thought they could trace back to the Greeks. Learning about the Classics was thus highly regarded because it was a discipline which taught us about ourselves.

This traditional veneration of the Classics, however, has been under erasure for some time. What was once placed with reverence at the very core of the idea of the Western university is now disposable. It is therefore not just the existence of the present West which is falling into question, but also the past West. Our memory banks are being wiped. The Classics, as Hanson and Heath have controversially put it:

'unfamiliar to the general public at large, are now also dead in the university itself. Today Classics embraces a body of knowledge and a way of looking at the world that are virtually unrecognised, an almost extinct species even in its own protected habitat, the academic department. We Classicists are the dodo birds of academia: when we retire or die, our positions are either eliminated or replaced with temporary or part-time help.'²²

A number of reasons have been offered to explain this fall from grace.

First of all, the Classicists find themselves particularly vulnerable to what Lyotard once called the postmodern condition²³. Just as Lyotard predicted, the shift toward knowledge-based political economies in the West has brought about profound changes in the way the reproduction of knowledge is legitimated. The meaning and purpose of knowledge is now grounded upon neo-liberal performativity. Like all other subjects within the humanities, the Classics have always had to find answers to the so called 'vocational question', but the social infrastructure which formerly enabled it to answer convincingly has been progressively stripped away. The meaning of the Classics is undermined in a world where the primary questions about research and learning become 'what can this perform for Great Britain PLC?' If the university is no longer for reproducing Western culture but about generating performance orientated skills for a competitive knowledge based economy, where is the market niche for the Classics?

Secondly, the legitimacy of the Classics is also in doubt amongst the very people who might otherwise be relied upon to rally to its defence against the forces identified above. For many, the study of classical antiquity has accumulated strong associations with elitist traditions in social thought which are no longer acceptable. These negative associations have some basis in the days when the university was commonly seen as an institution for the reproduction of national ruling elites. The classics were initially promoted as an essential grounding in the 'liberal education' of these elites. These disciplinary foundations are evident in the Latin root of the word, being *classicus*, meaning the 'first in rank or class'²⁴. The classics were a carefully selected canon of Western texts and artefacts with which the sons of the upper classes could be prepared for their future responsibilities. A clear link was at least implicit, when not made explicit, between the exclusionary practices that inevitably go with maintaining an orthodox canon of 'classics' and social exclusion on grounds of class,

²² Victor Davis Hanson & John Heath, *Who Killed Homer? : The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom* (San Francisco, Encounter Books, 2001), p.4.

²³ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1984).

²⁴ Tom MacArthur, *The Oxford Companion to the English Language* (Oxford, OUP, 1992), p.217.

race and gender. Reading the classical texts in their native tongue also required a long and expensive education in two dead languages - way beyond reach of the multitude. And of course it also helped that many of the texts included within the classical canon did openly defend the ideologies of aristocracy. By studying the 'greats', the best in art, poetry and thought which Western antiquity had to offer, first class students were supposed to undergo a first class training in moral excellence or virtue. When access to a university education in the West gradually became more democratised during the 20th century it was thus perhaps not entirely surprising that the classics became vulnerable to the charge of being a bastion of conservative or even reactionary views²⁵. Many scholars have responded to this charge, creatively and with some humour, to demonstrate how relevant their beloved Classics still are²⁶. But a few Classicists have not helped their cause by attempting to defend it with exactly the same kind of language which had alienated people in the first place.

Thirdly, with the incipient decline of the 'rise of the West' historical grand narrative, our confidence in the pertinence of the legacy of the Western classical heritage seems obliged to submit itself to a review. Part of the appeal of Greek and Roman antiquity - the reason they were put on their pedestal of the 'Classics' in the first place, was the conviction that these civilizations made unique achievements which are of universal value: philosophy; logic; democracy; law... the litany was once very long. We are not quite so confident about this now. Sometimes, one can almost picture the ghosts of the Western Classics peering down at us looking bitterly disappointed. We do not have to ask them why they look at us like that because we already know the answer: 'how are you going to persuade people we still have something unique to offer the world when you have created all this unbelievable mess?' E.H. Carr once argued that history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present²⁷. The present then, seems to see the Classical West differently to our forbears. If it is true that the Western Alliance and the regimes it built are in danger of breaking up, if it is true that the Western powers will have to deal with the prospect of a new centre of gravity in the global political economy, or if it is true that the 'Western economic miracle' was just an ecological blind alley, maybe the Classical West will have to live with being just another ancient civilisation amongst others within a more plural set of narratives about world history?

This review is already well under way. We have become accustomed to the charge that our historiographical fixation upon the Greeks and Romans 'as if they were the only people on earth in the respective centuries of visible activity' has been Eurocentric²⁸. Edward Said's work has inspired a generation of postcolonial studies on orientalism in historical scholarship²⁹. Meanwhile, Martin Bernal has also been

²⁵ An early observer of the fall of deference to the Classics was C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution: The Rede Lecture 1959* (Cambridge, CUP, 1961). C.P. Snow lamented that the Western mind had split into two cultures which both constructed caricatures of each other. These caricatures prevented communication and mutual appreciation. For Snow, the scientific caricature of its 'elitist' other was of a culture that had turned its back on modernity and the hope of progress in favour of a 'luddite' literary canon that opposed the scientific revolution.

²⁶ One playful example is Bernard Knox, *The Oldest Dead White European Males and Other Reflections on the Classics* (New York, Norton, 1993).

²⁷ E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (London, Penguin, 1961), pg.21-30.

²⁸ Barry Gills & William Thompson, 'Globalizations, global histories and historical globalities', in *Globalization and Global History* (Oxon, Routledge, 2006), p.1.

²⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (

influential with his charge that much scholarship on classical antiquity systematically suppressed all evidence of the Eastern origins of what we conventionally think of as Western civilization³⁰. To participate in the notion of the Classical West thus helps to reproduce ‘an imaginary line of civilisational apartheid that separates East from West’ and thus serves to reify an ideology of ‘Aryan Western supremacy’³¹.

One potential problem with the sackcloth and ashes phase of revisionism, however, is that it could have profoundly nihilist consequences. Whilst we purge ourselves of all the ways in which the West has abused its ancient history in the pursuit of unjust causes, the ensuing nausea could easily prevent us from paying attention to our human need to care for our ancestors. After ‘Classical Western’ antiquity has been binned, the ruins of Greece and Rome still remain. It is still our heritage to cherish. So what shall we do now with all those Greek and Roman old bones? How do we find a new way of listening with respect to what the people who once stood up in them had to say? Can the would-be Post-Western Westerner avoid the crimes of irrelevance, elitism, euro-centrism, orientalism, ethnocentrism, or worse, whilst reasserting his conviction in the pertinence of ancient Greece and Rome in the 21st century?

I believe that we can. Post-Western Westerners, both inside and outside the discipline of the Classics, have a collective responsibility to put our shoulder to the wheel here. Unless we can all contribute to a reformation of meaning in our Classical heritage pertinent to the post-western world, we risk losing an important resource for understanding our contemporary Western predicament and for constructing a more healthy and sustainable post-western West. The remainder of this paper will attempt to demonstrate this by picking through the ruins of Western antiquity and making a case for the salvage of cynicism. Through the juxtaposition of modern cynicism with the ancient cynicism of Antisthenes and Diogenes, we shall try to sketch out a neo-classical vision for moving toward the post-western west.

What do we mean when we use the word cynicism today? Perhaps the first thing to note about the words cynic, cynicism and cynical is that they are polysemous. That is to say, in modern discourse these words have a variety of possible meanings. This does not mean that the variegated meanings are utterly discrete – in fact what follows is partly inspired by Peter Sloterdijk’s thesis that all the meanings of cynicism have inter-textual resonances that form part of a continuum³². But it does mean that to understand cynicism it is sensible to begin with analysis before we can move on to synthesis. It also means we have to tread very carefully, because if we use the word cynicism carelessly people are likely to get the wrong idea about the author and wonder about his motives.

³⁰ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (London, Free Association, 1987), Vol. 1. IR scholars would be well advised to note that many of Bernal’s allegations about scholarship, past and present, have been bitterly disputed on many counts. Rather than saving the silver tipped bullets for those who really deserve them, it appears Bernal may have carelessly wasted some on innocent people. See Lefkowitz & Rogers, *Black Athena Revisited* (Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

³¹ John M. Hobson, ‘Towards a post-racist critical IR’, *Review of International Studies*, vol.33, Special Issue, April 2007, p.94.

³² Peter Sloterdijk, translated by Michael Eldred, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (London, Verso, 1988).

When words are polysemous, we generally look for the context of the discourse within which they are embedded to determine their particular meaning. For cynic, cynical and cynicism I find it useful to break their contexts down into five main groups:

- 1) Accusative;
- 2) Reflexive;
- 3) Projective;
- 4) Cathartic;
- 5) Ancient;

Obviously this typology is not necessarily meant to be exhaustive. Other people might also wish to cut the cake differently.

1) Accusative.

When the words cynical and cynicism are used within an accusative context the cynic is a social archetype we see in others whose character or actions we hold up for reproach or condemnation (e.g. ‘they’re so cynical’, ‘the cynicism of this decision beggars belief’, ‘this is just a cynical ploy to secure oil supplies from...’, ‘they’re only doing this in a cynical effort to shore up their alliance’). It is useful to subdivide this accusative use of the word cynical into ‘character’ and ‘action’ in order to capture the full range of semantic resonance.

a) Cynical character.

Here we use the word cynic when we want to conjure up a reproachful image of the misanthrope who has a disposition to find fault or see the worst in somebody, or the worst in humanity in general. This individual has a deeply unattractive propensity to disbelieve in the possibility of human sincerity or goodness, particularly when it comes to the conduct of politics, business and international relations. This is allied with a tendency to sneer or snipe at those who are greater than oneself, or those who are attempting something greater than oneself. In this manner, the great and the good amongst us are brought down by the small and the mean.

Such cynical characters are often portrayed as the enemy within, who have a propensity to turn national and international self images, identities, institutions and high principles into objects of ridicule. Although used to describe an archetype, this accusative use of the word cynicism is often applied with a broad brush:

‘What is that threat? It is the New British Disease: the self-destructive sickness of national cynicism. It is spread by so-called opinion formers within the British elite. The disease shows itself in a readiness to denigrate our country and praise others; to devalue our achievements, and envy others; to hold our national institutions in contempt; to deride every one of our national figures... Too many politicians, academics, churchmen, authors, commentators and journalists exhibit the full-blown symptoms of this disease.’³³

The cynical character stands accused not just of being a negative irritant, but a threat to national security. The cynic is often portrayed as a perennial problem for modern

³³ Michael Portillo, ‘Cynicism, the new British disease’, *The Observer*, 16/01/94.

democracy because he undermines that essential bond of trust between the politicians and the people upon which representative government is based:

‘We devote reams of space to debating why there is so much cynicism about politics and public life. In this, politicians are obliged to go into self-flagellation, admitting that it is our own fault. And, believe it or not, most politicians come into public life with a desire to serve and by and large, try to do the right thing not the wrong thing.’³⁴

Tony Blair’s plaintive last speech as Prime Minister of Great Britain was poignant because the cynical disposition in public life was something he had declared war on right from the bright ‘new dawn has broken’ salad days of his first administration:

‘On the 1st May 1997, it wasn’t just the Tories who were defeated. Cynicism was defeated. On the 1st May 1997, fear lost. Hope won. The giving age began.’³⁵

But evidently, cynicism was not defeated decisively, because fighting cynicism became a perennial theme of the Blair government. When campaigning for Africa, Blair was fighting ‘the cynics back home’³⁶. When speaking in the Commons in favour of military action in Iraq, Blair was defending US foreign policy against European ‘cynicism’ about its motives³⁷. For Tony Blair, fighting cynicism became an ongoing mission because his cynical archetype was the antithesis of hope. The cynic is predisposed to argue that politicians come into public life with a desire to serve themselves. Consequently, the cynic is disposed to insinuate about underlying motives behind advocating US liberal intervention. In Blair’s world then, where too many people are ready to jump to the conclusion that all politicians are ‘only in it for themselves’, good governance becomes almost impossible.

This brings us to another important aspect of the cynical character in the accusative sense, namely his negative role as an apostle of apathy. The cynic has a formidable talent for the mockery of those who seek to make things better, which makes him a natural ally of the status quo and the natural enemy of progressive politics:

‘We must awaken and ignite in our people the hope that change can bring, because the last weapon the Tories have, you know their final weapon, is despair and cynicism. It’s telling people well it doesn’t matter who’s in power ‘cos they’re all the same, it’ll make no difference, nothing can ever change. Rubbish. Of course things can change. When they say “don’t let Labour ruin it” I say to them “Britain can be better than this”.’³⁸

In his role as the apostle of apathy, the cynical character stands accused of adopting an air of incredulity toward the feasibility or merit of ostensibly admirable aims and objectives. He advocates pessimism rather than hope with regard to the prospects for positive human agency or the possibility of human progress. And of course he will

³⁴ Tony Blair, ‘Our Nation’s Future - On Public Life’, Speech delivered at Reuters on Canary Wharf, London, Tuesday 12th June 2007 (www.number-10.gov.uk/output/page11923.asp).

³⁵ Tony Blair, ‘Speech to the Labour Party Annual Conference’, Brighton, September 1997.

³⁶ Jackie Ashley, ‘Party Chiefs to Tackle Cynicism’, *The Guardian*, 11/02/02.

³⁷ Blair’s PM speech in the debate over the House of Commons amendment approving the use of ‘all means necessary to ensure the disarmament of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction’, *Hansard*, 18/03/03, column 771.

³⁸ Tony Blair, excerpt from a Labour Party general election broadcast, 24th April 1997.

seize upon any evidence of the negative outcomes of political activism and seek to universalise them.

b) Cynical action.

Here the cynic stands accused as the agent who can transcend the inhibitions of public shame or private conscience. The cynical agent acts against better knowledge. The cynic is someone who has done wrong knowingly, or is capable of doing wrong knowingly ('they know what they do'). This conception of the cynical action is deeply embedded within the psychological engine room of Western norms about political agency. For example, the convention of ministerial responsibility, a central plank of British constitutional theory, holds that governments are made accountable through its ministers to Parliament. In order to hold ministers accountable to Parliament we have an agreed set of rules known as the *Ministerial Code*³⁹. Under section 1 of this code principle 3 states that:

'It is of paramount importance that Ministers give accurate and truthful Information to Parliament, correcting any inadvertent error at the earliest opportunity. Ministers who knowingly mislead Parliament will be expected to offer their resignation to the Prime Minister.'⁴⁰

The 'unwelcome adverb' *knowingly*, as Tomkins calls it, was inserted by John Major in a deft response to the Nolan Committee on *Standards in Public Life*⁴¹. In politics it is not necessarily fatal if you do wrong in error or ignorance (in fact to admit this will sometimes get you off the hook), but if you are successfully accused of doing wrong knowingly you are usually in trouble, because it has been exposed as a *cynical act*.

It is around the subtle adverb *knowingly* that the Scott, Hutton and Butler inquiries have all danced around the controversy over democratic accountability in British foreign policy. Scott perhaps came closest toward the accusative, stating that a minister had been 'designedly uninformative' to Parliament about the decision to sell weapons of mass destruction to Iraq, but then undermined this with the paradoxical conclusion that he had no 'duplicitous intention'⁴². With Lord Hutton, the judgement was that the Government did not knowingly add false claims to the JIC dossier on Iraq. Famously, the modern distinction between the conscious and the unconscious was used to account for some of the evidence which might have led to an alternative judgement. Hutton considered that the 'possibility cannot be completely ruled out' that the Prime Minister had:

'subconsciously influenced Mr Scarlett and the other members of the JIC to make the wording of the dossier somewhat stronger than it would have been if it had been contained in a normal JIC assessment.'⁴³

³⁹ *Ministerial Code: A Code of Ethics and Procedural Guidance for Ministers*, published by the Cabinet Office, July 2005 (www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk).

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p.1.

⁴¹ Adam Tomkins, *The Constitution After Scott: Government Unwrapped* (Oxford, OUP, 1998), p.41-45.

⁴² Sir Richard Scott, *Report of the Inquiry into the Export of Defence Equipment and Dual-Use Goods to Iraq and Related Prosecutions* (London, HMSO, 1996), see paragraphs D3.107 & D3.124.

⁴³ Lord Hutton, *Report of the Inquiry into the Circumstances Surrounding the Death of David Kelly* (HMSO, 2004), para. 467, vi & vii.

In some dark recess of the unconscious mind, the Prime Minister may have half suspected that he was attempting to cajole the nation into an unpopular war through the misuse of unreliable intelligence about weapons of mass destruction, but in this helpful clarification of the convention of ministerial responsibility, it is only the conscious mind that can be held to account. In other words in order to commit a cynical act, you have to be conscious that you are acting against better knowledge when you are doing it. For Lord Butler, it is acknowledged that the intelligence was misleading, but this was due to collective errors of government and there is no evidence of deliberate distortion or culpable negligence⁴⁴.

2) Reflexive.

When the words cynical and cynicism are used within a reflexive context the cynic is a social archetype who, in contrast to the accusative sense above, we claim to recognise in ourselves, or with whom we strongly identify (e.g. 'I am cynical', 'we are cynical', or 'they have good reason to be cynical'). Often, this reflexivity is used very simply as a counter-accusative position. If we continue to use the explanatory example of debate over British foreign policy for example, it has not been uncommon for people to admit that they are cynical, but then argue that responsibility for this lies with the cynicism of those who took us into an unwinnable war. It has also not been uncommon to comment that Middle Eastern public opinion has good reasons to be cynical about Western commitment to the 'roadmap for peace'. Cynicism breeds cynicism is generally the message. But the internalisation of cynicism, once initiated, does tend to take people on a journey, and thus what was once just a simple reflex can quickly become rather more complex. Let us try to convey a sense of this journey by subdividing cynicism again into character and action.

a) Cynical character.

Here the cynic has travelled some way down the road of being the habitual debunker. Experience of life somehow drives him to draw attention to the seemingly ubiquitous evidence of hypocrisy. Suggestions that the motivation behind this is a desire to tear down the authority of morality are not quite right. Rather, ethics has become a serious business, perhaps too serious, that cannot live easily with its own contradictions. The reflexive cynical character will tend to profess a general contempt for the promulgation of ethics with limited liability. Reflexive cynicism involves an irresistible temptation to observe contradictions between words and actions – between what is said and what is done. In reflexive cynicism, the conscious mind is always already on the lookout for betrayal by the unconscious, being only too alive to the human capacity for self-deception.

The reflexive cynic will often be the conscious subject of alienation and disillusionment. Surprise! The gap between words and actions is more universal than we had previously thought. The gap also exists for people on my own side. This is a road that leads to many instances of disillusion. This means the cynic develops a stance of incredulity ('once bitten, twice shy') toward national and international self-images, identities, institutions, organisations and values. The cross she has to bear is that of being the perpetual party pooper, with a compulsion for blurting out truths that

⁴⁴ Lord Butler, *The Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction* (HMSO, 2004).

are not welcome. One way of offsetting this, of course, is playful self-deprecation about the contradiction between your own words and actions.

The cynical character here is a world weary advocate for experience over hope and has an acute sensitivity to the human capacity for making things worse by trying to make things better. The default disposition is to question the wisdom of action, or of course the ulterior motives behind seeking to act. The reflexive cynic is wary of empty promises. Progress? Watch out, this could be bad for your health! He will also warn you against the futile gesture. Resistance? Don't be a fool! Keep your head down and wait till the fuss has blown over. There is a corresponding intolerance toward facile optimism. Pessimism of the intellect allied with optimism of the will? Give me a break!

b) Cynical action.

The way reflexive cynicism translates into action is not always predictable. Sometimes it can lead, as has previously been accused, towards a conscious stance of inaction: apathy rules ok! Why bother to do anything when it only encourages them? Jean Baudrillard once lambasted righteous indignation about this form of political action and toyed with its possibilities⁴⁵. The mass withdrawal into the private sphere and the ensuing collapse in participation produces a silence that refuses to be spoken for in its name. The game of political representation consequently implodes into the TV studios. The story starts to become about how well the political parties are presenting their story in their reality game-show. The armchair gamble is that there comes a tipping point where the apathy of the masses ceases to be an asset to the powerful and starts to mature into a crisis of legitimacy.

On the other hand, reflexive cynicism can often express itself as agency with stamina. The reflexive cynical activist has 'seen them come and go' and somehow survived the relentless disappointments of active service. The survival of cynical agency amidst disillusionment thus becomes a daily semi-heroic act. The health of civil society relies on this psychological strategy for survival in action more than many people seem to realise. After all, who would you rather have fighting on your side: the young naïve idealist who may not turn up tomorrow or the hardened veteran who has learned to 'expect the worst' and 'be ready for anything'?

Most of us cannot afford to give up the day job though, and so a lot of cynical action tends to express itself at work. A lot of cynical action in the workplace tends to be low level disillusionment with what one is doing. Reflexive cynicism can occur where we know what we are doing and can see where it will all lead us in the end, but we still do it because:

'in the short run, the force of circumstances and the instinct for self-preservation are speaking the same language, and they are telling us that it has to be so. Others would do it anyway, perhaps worse.'⁴⁶

Take the new initiative from the top that everybody knows will end in chaos but has to be implemented nevertheless. Together we boldly strive to go through the motions of compliance without genuine belief. Take the dodgy dealings we might be asked to

⁴⁵ Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities* (New York, Semitext, 1983).

⁴⁶ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (London, Verso, 1988), p.5.

participate in or the exploitative relations tolerated at work. In order to survive, people have to choose their fights carefully and selectively. Together we learn how to cope with the psychic fallout that comes with the pragmatic compromise of making these calculations in everyday life. This is all fruitful ground for the formation of reflexive cynicism.

Other reflexive cynical actors at work tend to proliferate in jobs where people are employed to mop up and pick up the pieces of a crazy world. The classic film MASH played upon this phenomenon. As the characters showed, cynicism can be a healthy tactic for dealing with the grotesque absurdity of some extreme situations, like trying to provide healthcare in a war zone. Some employees of certain NGO's are perhaps amongst the most thoughtful reflexive cynics one could ever have the pleasure to meet. Reflexive cynics in action often like to think they will be the ones left behind to 'keep the show on the road' when the 'shit hits the fan' and 'all the optimists have gone off to be optimistic somewhere else'.

3) Projective:

Here the cynic is neither the object of condemnation nor identified with the self, but an imaginary other who gives voice to scurrilous thoughts. The cynic becomes an anonymous citizen upon whom insolent observations may be safely projected. This is common in the media where the interlocutor has half a mind on the private thoughts of his viewer or listener. Projective cynicism is the means by which an impertinent discourse may be playfully distanced (e.g. 'I suppose a cynic would say you are just...', 'a cynical friend of mine said to me the other day that this is all about...'). The projective cynic is the hypothetical nobody who, because he only exists in the inter-subjective ether, can tell the emperor what many are thinking in private but which few are prepared to tell him directly.

4) Cathartic.

With cathartic cynicism the stakes have been raised markedly, because it is the flip side of 'they know what they do'. Here we are talking about people with real power, where reflexive cynicism has been burdened with a much heavier caseload.

Sometimes it is best here to see the cathartic cynic as a mediator in a mental conflict, where all those years of power have brought changes that have divided the mind against itself:

'In mental conflict a mind is divided against itself, and becomes a battleground of opposing beliefs or desires. The conflicted mind is characterised by relations not just of difference and divergence, but of contention and confrontation. It feels not so much attracted from outside by incompatible alternatives between which it has to make a choice, as torn within itself by hostile forces between which it cannot make peace. It is aware not just of contrasting considerations that need to be brought together in an exercise of judgement, but of colliding tendencies that refuse to co-exist within a single perspective.'⁴⁷

⁴⁷. A.W. Price, *Mental Conflict* (London and New York, Routledge, 1995), p.1-2.

The mind splits, but the two rival parties still somehow have to live under the same roof. It is like a couple who cannot bear to speak to each other anymore but use their children in order to communicate. In politics, business and war, 'it is easy to get one's hands dirty and it is often right to do so'⁴⁸. But an occupational hazard for those whose profession is to shoulder responsibility for the 'dirty work' is the compulsion to be frank. The problem of course is that in mental conflict, as in any conflict, truth is the first casualty of war, but sometimes the dissonance reaches levels of such intensity that a desire grows to turn the truth back into a simple concept again⁴⁹. The low ethics puts out a feeler toward the high ethics and seeks an armistice in order to talk. Rival parties within a mental conflict then meet to be frank with one another under the supervision of a third-party. In this instance of cathartic cynicism the cynic acts as if he is speaking to you, the third party, but slowly it becomes obvious that he is actually talking to a rival part of himself.

In other cases cathartic cynicism is rather looking for confirmation in another. That is to say, a low ethics seeks conspiratorial release with the low ethics of a fellow subject. The first tentative moves toward catharsis are often subtle, humorous and deniable (did he really mean that or didn't he?). But then, if a cynical signal is reciprocated, the game of mutual disinhibition can begin. The wry observations, witticisms and confidences of a governing consciousness that has learned 'how not to be good' starts to flow, especially after a couple of drinks:

'For there is such a gap between how one lives and how one ought to live that anyone who abandons what is done for what ought to be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation: for a man who wishes to make a vocation of being good at all times will come to ruin among so many who are not good. Hence it is necessary for a prince who wishes to maintain his position to learn how not to be good'⁵⁰

Cathartic cynicism could thus be seen as a habitual discourse for dealing with the cognitive dissonance that takes place when principles and norms encounter the necessity of their violation. Usually this takes place in confidence within the private sphere, which is why it is not easy to gather concrete evidence to ascertain how widespread cathartic cynicism is. But sometimes private cynicisms leak into the public domain, where they can be recycled by popular culture.

Sometimes the low ethics becomes so confident of its position in the scheme of things that the high ethics feels like a cumbersome mask, and so it is allowed to slip – a holiday is taken away from the tiresome obligation to legitimate. So you really want the truth? Well here it is. How do you like it?

⁴⁸ Walzer, M, 'Political action: the problem of dirty hands', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, No.2 (1973), quoted in C.A.J. Coady, 'Politics and the Problem of dirty hands' in *A Companion To Ethics* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1991), edited by Peter Singer.

⁴⁹ As Iain McDonald, head of the Ministry of Defence's Defence Sales Secretariat wistfully put it in oral evidence to the Scott Inquiry, 'Truth is a difficult concept'. See Richard Norton-Taylor, *Truth is a Difficult Concept: Inside the Scott Inquiry* (London, Fourth Estate, 1995).

⁵⁰ Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter XV.

'In its cynicisms hegemonic power airs its secrets a little, indulges in semi-self-enlightenment, and tells all... The more a modern society appears to be without alternatives, the more it will allow itself to be cynical. In the end, it becomes ironical about its own legitimation.'⁵¹

Where there is only one game in town, cathartic cynicism often feels it can afford to be less careful about its confidences. At last! The low ethics can come out of the closet, flaunt its amorality and tell the truth about itself – often dressed as wit. We know it is cathartic when it makes us laugh and then momentarily we pause with shocked wonder at our laughter.

5) Ancient Cynicism

The word cynic is derived from the Greek word for dog (*kun*). It was applied to a social movement that began in the 4th century BC and persisted late into the Roman Empire until it was snuffed out by the rise of Christianity. To be a cynic was to be a dog. To be cynical (*kunikos*) was to be 'dog-like'⁵².

In human thought, the perceived traits and characteristics of animals have often been used to describe or express judgements about people. If we think someone is greedy, we might call him a pig. If we think someone is lazy, we might call him a sloth. If we think someone is crafty, we might call him a fox. And so it goes. Nowadays, most of us are aware that these metaphors are anthropomorphic even as we use them, and that they say more about our feelings toward human nature than they do about the animals themselves. We know that the pig is not really greedy, the sloth is not really lazy, the fox not crafty, etc. Rather, animals often represent aspects of ourselves⁵³. So, what aspects of the human condition were the people of classical antiquity referring to when they classified the adherents of a particular social movement as 'dog-like'?

From the extant literature, it would seem that Hellenic attitudes toward the dog strongly resemble those of many other societies since humans first struck up an alliance with it back in the Upper Palaeolithic, including our own. The attitude we generally find in Hellenic literature is one of profound ambivalence. Sometimes the dog is a paragon amidst the animal kingdom, at other times a pariah and outcast⁵⁴.

On the plus side, the dog was an important guardian within a human society where security was an important value. The barking of dogs gave the *polis* and the *oikos* advance warning of the approach of the potentially predatory foreigner. At the micro-political level of the *oikos*, they could also be bred and trained to be an effective deterrent in themselves. In Homer's *Odysseus*, for example, we find an instance where 360 fatted hogs are guarded at night by:

'four dogs, as savage as wild beasts, trained by the master swineheard.'⁵⁵

⁵¹ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (London, Verso, 1987), p.111-2.

⁵² C.T. Onions (ed), *The Oxford Dictionary Of English Etymology* (Oxford, OUP, 1966), p.240.

⁵³ James Serpell, 'From paragon to pariah: some reflections on human attitudes to dogs', in James Serpell (ed), *The Domestic Dog: its evolution, behaviour and interactions with people* (Cambridge, CUP, 1995), p.254.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p.246-7.

⁵⁵ Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by E.V. Rieu (London, Penguin, 1991), p.207.

The dogs fly toward Odysseus when they catch sight of him approaching, and the swineherd has to call them off:

‘Old man, that was a narrow escape! The dogs could have almost torn you to pieces in a moment’⁵⁶

360 fatted hogs is an awful lot of money in Homer’s world, and the poet himself assures us in the narrative that Odysseus might have suffered a savage attack. Security was a serious business, and these dogs were trained to kill.

Secondly, dogs often made a contribution to the wealth of the Greek household. The hunting dog actually helped to put food on the table. Some have argued that the human and the wolf domesticated each other through a mutually beneficial hunting alliance between the two species⁵⁷. When Odysseus returns to his homestead after twenty years of exile he meets Argus his old hunting dog who, in his prime, had gone after wild goats, deer and hares:

‘you’d be astonished at his speed and power. No game that he gave chase to could escape him in the deepest depth of the forest. He was a marvel too at picking up the scent.’⁵⁸

Thirdly, the dog was the master’s loyal companion and friend. When Argus sees Odysseus he pricks up his ears and wags his tail. He is the only sentient being that can still spontaneously recognise the master of the household despite his beggar’s rags and the ravages of time. The faithful dog is always pleased to see his master, will always provide the affection that is not contingent upon success or appearance, and the master will usually be delighted to receive it because it provides him with feelings of unconditional acceptance⁵⁹. In this respect the dog may often be closer to its master than any other member of his household. Argus can remember Odysseus better than his own son Telemachus, quicker even than his own wife Penelope. The feeling seems to be mutual. As Argus dies, Odysseus the sacker of cities, archetypal hard man of the Western world, ‘brushed away a tear’⁶⁰. Our master loves his dog.

On the other hand, the ability of the Greek dog to inveigle his way into the heart of his master was also capable of inspiring human suspicion, denigration and hostility. Ever since his first alliance with hunter-gatherers some 12,000 years ago, the dog has patrolled that uncertain boundary line that divides nature and man⁶¹. The dog was the first animal to be domesticated by man and as such, represents the domestication of nature and the domestication of the human subject himself. Consequently, when the dog absentmindedly reveals too much of his animal nature and fails to live up to his quasi-human status (for example when he shits or shags in public, sniffs genitals, licks his balls), he reminds humanity of the animal within man.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p.208.

⁵⁷ James Serpell, *op cit*, p.247.

⁵⁸ Homer, *op cit*, p.263.

⁵⁹ Lynette A. Hart, ‘Dogs as human companions: a review of the relationship’ in James Serpell, *op cit*, p.164.

⁶⁰ Homer, *op cit*.

⁶¹ James Serpell, ‘Hair of the dog’, *op cit*, p.261.

Sometimes, the dog also represents the beast lurking under the skin of domesticated nature waiting to exploit the fragility of civilisation. In the *Iliad*, when Homer really wants to drive home the pathos of human conflict, he begins to talk about the eating habits of dogs in times of war⁶².

The dog's loyalty, its boundless affection, its eagerness to please, its readiness to accept the master as the dominant partner, also appears to have provoked mixed feelings. As in our own society this was part of what made the Greek dog so therapeutic and appealing, but on a bad day such behaviour might be construed as fawning, sycophantic and obsequious⁶³. Sometimes friendship between the unequal can begin to cloy. On other bad days the faithfulness of the dog might also begin to press ethical claims upon its master that engendered a burdensome sense of guilt when it came to treating him just like any other domesticated animal. If times were hard a good dog might have to be sold, abandoned, killed or even eaten. As we have already observed, humans are capable of constructing complex psychological defence mechanisms to protect their consciences from conflict. Perceiving dogs in an ambivalent light made it easier to both love them and dispose of them with a clear conscience. The Greek word for dog, when projected onto humans, thus logically accumulated insulting or disparaging connotations, denoting baseness, illegitimacy, shame or inferiority⁶⁴.

In ancient Greece, there were also populations of feral dogs, without any owner or a home to go to. As with modern feral populations, such dogs had to fend for themselves, scavenging off the carrion and the rubbish thrown out by the *oikos* and the *polis*. The word dog could thus also be used as an insult when people were getting themselves ready to *other* someone into a human outcast, exile, refugee or migrant. This person would thus have to live a dog's life of scavenging and begging along the margins of Hellenic society.

We have tried to convey something of the ambivalence that the Greek word for 'dog' signified when applied to the human subject. What remains to be described is why a social movement might be prepared to step forward and actually call itself 'doglike' with pride and self-assurance. What did the Greek think he was doing when he agreed to collude with the identification of himself as a cynic?

All social movements are complex things that contain a large number of individuals with a huge variety of sometimes contradictory desires, motivations, and objectives. To abstract is to vulgarise, to fail to do justice to the richness of social movements, all the characters who participate in them, and all the scholars who write about them. Ancient cynicism is no exception to this rule, but if I had to put my head on the block and sum it up in one sentence I would say it was a utopian attempt to find a resolution to the mental conflict which arose from the contradiction between

⁶² For example, when Priam contemplates defeat in the Trojan war, he forecasts that: 'the dogs I reared in the house and at my own table to guard the doors will lie in the gateway with their hearts excited by gnawing my bones...when an old man has been killed and the dogs are mutilating his grey head and grey beard and private parts, this is the most pitiful sight that poor mortals can see.' Homer, *The Iliad* (London, Penguin, 1987), translated by Martin Hammond, p.352-353.

⁶³ Serpell, 'From Paragon to Pariah', *op cit*, p.252.

⁶⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy* (New York, CUP, 1986), p.414.

the concept of the unity of mankind in Greek thought and the overwhelming reality of slavery.

This assertion is contestable on two counts. Firstly, it is generally accepted that a concept of the unity of mankind did emerge in antiquity, germinating out of Homer and the Pre-Socratics, and evolving into a more mature stage in the thought of the Stoics⁶⁵. But it is not always accepted that the development of the idea of the unity of mankind prompted any critique of the ancient institution of slavery. Indeed, a more common view is well articulated by Fogel:

‘For 3,000 years – from the time of Moses to the end of the 17th century – virtually every major statesman, philosopher, theologian, writer and critic accepted the existence and legitimacy of slavery. The word ‘accepted’ is chosen deliberately, for these men of affairs and moulders of thought neither excused, condoned, pardoned, nor forgave the institution. They did not have to; they were not burdened by the view that slavery was wrong. Slavery was considered to be part of the natural scheme of things.’⁶⁶

Such views are not so very difficult to counter. The classic reference is to Aristotle’s *Politics* (1253b20-23). Here Aristotle candidly states that he *has* been burdened by arguments suggesting that slavery is wrong:

‘Others say that it is contrary to nature to rule as master over slave, because the distinction between slave and free is one of convention only, and in nature there is no difference, so that this form of rule is based on force and is therefore not just.’⁶⁷

Aristotle was clearly convinced that such arguments were worthy enough for him to have to pick up the challenge. He then sets about his famous defence of slavery, arguing that it is not only necessary but natural and just. The game of critique and counter-critique seems to be well under way, and the opening moves have already been worked out for Aristotle’s students to learn and practice.

Unfortunately, Aristotle does not tell us who the critics of slavery were. The second reason why my assertion that ancient Cynicism was an attempt to resolve the mental conflict arising from the contradiction between the emergence of cosmopolitan thought and the existence of slavery is contestable is that modern classical scholarship usually identifies the Sophists as the prime suspects⁶⁸. In support of this a fragment known to be written by a Sophist called Alcidamas is usually cited:

⁶⁵ The classic narrative is H.C. Baldry, *The Unity of Mankind in Greek Thought* (Cambridge, CUP, 1965).

⁶⁶ Fogel, R.W., *Without Consent or Contract*, p.201. Quoted in Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge, CUP, 1996), p.9.

⁶⁷ Aristotle, *The Politics* (London, Penguin, 1962), translated by T.A. Sinclair, p.63.

⁶⁸ See: Robert Schlaifer, ‘Greek theories of slavery from Homer to Aristotle’ in M. Finley (ed) *Slavery in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, Heffer, 1960); Giuseppe Cambiano, ‘Aristotle and the anonymous opponents of slavery’, in M. Finley (New Jersey, Totowa, 1987); Joseph Vogt, *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1975).

‘God has set all men free; nature has made no man a slave’⁶⁹

Sometimes this is backed up with another fragment from the Sophist Antiphon:

‘By nature we are born alike in all respects, barbarians and Greeks’⁷⁰

These may then be compared with quotes from the tragedian Euripides, who was said to have associated with and been influenced by prominent Sophists, and whose plays furnish a wealth of instances where the victims of slavery appear to be represented in a sympathetic manner. On top of this it has been pointed out that the arguments cited by Aristotle bear the tell tale signs of an Older Sophist at work. The distinction between nature (*physis*) and convention (*nomos*), for example, were classic Sophistic terms used for debating matters ethical and political.

I certainly would not care to dismiss the view that the Sophists made a major contribution to the development of Cosmopolitan thought and that they may have been the first to express profound doubts about the legitimacy of slavery. However, what I would like to suggest is that by the time Aristotle was sitting down to write the *Politics*, he would have been aware of two philosophers who had both the motivation and the ability to take the critique of slavery to a new level of sophistication. The first of these was Antisthenes and the second was Diogenes.

We don’t know much about Antisthenes, but what we do know is suggestive. We know that he was first a student of Gorgias, one of the most eminent Sophists after Protagoras, which would have made him a fellow student of Alcidas, whose anti-slavery fragment we have already mentioned⁷¹. After this Antisthenes was said to have become a follower and close companion of Socrates. In the *Phaedo* Plato suggests that Antisthenes was with Socrates in prison in the last few hours of his life. We know that he was the bastard son of an Athenian and a Thracian slave, and was thus not entitled to register as an Athenian citizen⁷². This is an interesting contradiction between the historical Socrates and the Platonic Socrates, because in the *Republic* Plato repeatedly has Socrates warn that bastards should not be admitted into higher education. Why does the foundation stone of Western political theory attempt to exclude the bastard? One possibility is that it was because the Athenian bastard sits at the nexus between politics and international relations. Therefore, an educated bastard might prove to be a very volatile agent in a society structured according to the division between the foreign slave and the native master. Being the fruit of a power relationship between his master father and his slave mother, Antisthenes would have contained the primary contradiction of Hellenic society at the very core of his being.

Sometimes fate would determine that the bastard would fall into the slave side of the Greek household. In other cases fate would smile on the bastard and he might actually become the object of paternal love, though this love, like the master’s love

⁶⁹ Quoted in Giuseppe Cambiano, *op cit*, p.24.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p.30-31.

⁷¹ Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge, CUP, 1971), p.305.

⁷² Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol.2 (London, Heinemann, 1925), translated by R.D. Hicks, p.3.

for his favourite dog, would inevitably be mixed with feelings of ambivalence. Out of such prospects some bastards were able to eke out a relatively comfortable existence. There are characters in Greek tragedy, for example, where the bastard son does find a niche within the classical polis. As for the bastard's feelings toward his mother, this must surely have been the wild card of antiquity. Most would surely have taken the easier option of disowning the shameful status of the breasts at which he had once so eagerly suckled. But what if the upwardly mobile bastard was capable of retaining this love for his mother as well as developing a genuine respect for his father? And what if such a man subsequently falls into a circle like that led by Socrates and is given the tools of logical reflection? What on earth is such a consciousness going to make of the society that made him?

It does seem that there was a critical mass of bastards in Athenian society which might thus have been capable of generating such an aberration. Various sources report that Antisthenes was in the habit of teaching philosophy at a venue called the 'white dog', which was a gymnasium and temple reserved especially for Athenian bastards⁷³. In the Platonic dialogues the dialectic takes place between sovereign minds. Knowledge is generated through interpersonal debate. But in Antisthenes it appears that an internal dialectic was going on between two halves of the self. Knowledge is generated through intrapersonal debate. Thus one anecdote about him that has survived is that he was once asked what advantage had accrued to him from his studies in philosophy. His reply was 'the ability to hold conversation with myself'⁷⁴. Of his writings, none of which have survived, one of them was said to have been entitled 'Of freedom and slavery'⁷⁵.

We don't know much about Antisthenes' philosophy. What we do know is pieced together from references to him by other ancient authors whose works have survived. Navia suggests that as with Plato, the manner of the death of Socrates must have had a profound effect upon Antisthenes⁷⁶. Like Plato, the initial reaction seems to have been disillusionment and withdrawal from public life. Given that Antisthenes was a bastard non-citizen, this probably didn't mean much as far as Athenian politics was concerned. What it probably meant was that he finally gave up on his ambition to earn a living as a Sophist, or in other words a higher education teacher of excellence to rich students aiming for a public career in law and politics. He became impatient with lectures about the principles of virtue without practical attempts to embody them. He began to define virtue as a rhetoric communicated through body-acts rather than speech-acts or, to be less obscure, Antisthenes began to adopt a stance of 'do as I do' not 'do as I say'⁷⁷. In this respect, he began to behave in a manner that would later be interpreted as 'doglike', experimenting with the idea of living a life outside the *oikos*. The idea of living a life outside the *oikos* was important because, as Aristotle makes clear in the *Politics*, the *oikoi* were the primary economic units within which slave

⁷³ Luis Navia, *Classical Cynicism: a critical study* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1996), p.15.

⁷⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *op cit*, p.9.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p.17.

⁷⁶ Navia, *op cit*, p.53-6.

⁷⁷ R. Bracht Branham, 'Defacing the currency: Diogenes' rhetoric and the invention of cynicism', in R. Bracht Branham & Marie-Odile Goulet-Gaze (eds), *The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1996), p.83.

ownership and production was organised⁷⁸. In other words, Antisthenes was attempting to embody a break with surplus accumulation through slavery to well being through sufficiency.

We move on now to Diogenes about whom we know a little more than Antisthenes. Diogenes was born in Sinope, a Greek colony lying along the northern coast of Turkey on the Black Sea, probably around 413 BC⁷⁹. Diogenes thus came from the eastern margins of Greek settlement, traditionally looked down upon by the Greeks on the Western coast of the Aegean. Like Antisthenes, Diogenes' mother was probably a woman of uncertain origin:

‘Snubbed by a man of noble descent for the lowly origins of his mother, Diogenes replied: ‘In my case, the line of my nobility begins with me, whereas in yours it ends with you.’⁸⁰

According to the legend, the philosophical career of Diogenes began after a scandal at the bank of Sinope. For some reason that is unknown Diogenes, who worked at the bank under the supervision of his father, took the rap for the deliberate devaluation of the currency. Like the Greek dog perhaps, he was an endearingly loyal son, but was disposable when it came to the crunch. He was prosecuted after an inquiry into the affair, convicted, and banished from the city of Sinope. The young man then drifted toward Delphi to ask the Oracle what he should do with his life now that the bottom had dropped out of it, whereupon the Oracle told him that he should ‘devalue the currency’.

Conviction and exile seems to have been a life changing experience that alienated Diogenes from the values of the city he had been brought up in. He had participated in an attempt to pursue the city's primary measure of value by clipping the coinage, but the subsequent disgrace had brought him in despair to Delphi. Later on in life, when taunted with the fact that he had been exiled for defacing the currency his reply was:

‘Nay it was through that, you miserable fellow, that I came to be a philosopher.’⁸¹

His previous life had brought him unhappiness. So, taking the cue from the oracle, Diogenes thus set out on a philosophical odyssey to devalue the currency of norms and values upon which his society is based and replace them according to alternative conceptions of well-being.

⁷⁸ Doyne Dawson, *Cities of the Gods: Communist Utopias in Greek Thought* (Oxford, OUP, 1992), chapter 2: ‘The cynic way: a life without the household’.

⁷⁹ Navia, *op cit*, p.85.

⁸⁰ Dimitri Gutas, ‘Sayings by Diogenes preserved in Arabic’, in M.O. Goulet-Caze & R. Goulet (eds), *Le cynisme ancien et ses prolongements: Actes du Colloque international du CNRS* (Paris, 1993).

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p.51.

His journey takes him to Athens, where he begins to rub shoulders with the philosophers there. After seeing, hearing or reading about the example of Antisthenes, Diogenes begins to emulate his lifestyle and makes a virtue out of his fate. He claims that his ostracism is a blessing because it has forced him to construct an autonomous life that is free of the *polis*. When reminded of his fall from grace when Sinope had condemned him to exile, Diogenes replied:

‘And I them, to home-staying.’⁸²

The citizens of Sinope, enclosed within the culture of communitarian life, are thus condemned to the unhappiness of a life lived without reflection. His alienation from Sinope leads, according to Diogenes, to his emancipation.

As with Antisthenes, the thought of Diogenes is communicated through the rhetoric of acts rather than through dialectic. But his acts seem more ‘dramatic’. He seems to turn his life into a performance that borrows ideas from the comedy of Greek theatre. He draws our attention to this in yet another act:

‘He was going into a theatre, meeting face to face those who were coming out, and being asked why, ‘this’, he said, ‘is what I practise doing all my life.’⁸³

When the people come out of the theatre, Diogenes goes into the theatre. In other words he brings theatre out onto the streets of Athens. He is a thinker who has turned his life into a stage. Upon this stage Diogenes enacts dramas that, like the comedies of Aristophanes, attempt to use wit to convey a serious message.

There is insufficient space here to present enough of these little dramas to do proper justice to the philosophy of Diogenes, but let us unwrap just a few that seem to be pertinent to the *West under erasure* discourses discussed above. Firstly, we should note that Ancient Cynicism initiates a western tradition of contempt for the follies of great power rivalry and predatory hegemony. Diogenes lived his adult life in the immediate aftermath of the great disaster of the Peloponnesian war - the consequence of a break up in the *original* Western Alliance. The disillusionment with power politics that this wrought in Athens, Corinth, and all the other cities Diogenes visited must have many of its people receptive to his cynical message, and that is presumably why so many anecdotes about him survived through word of mouth. The response of Diogenes to the tragedy of great power politics was a conscious attempt to turn Greek tragedy on its head. In the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, exile and homelessness is shown to be a disaster. To lose your *polis* and your *oikos* means social death and slavery. But Diogenes makes the utopian point of showing that he thinks that the *polis* and the *oikos* are things that humanity can do without. He is a poor homeless beggar, but he believes himself to be happy, because he is free from the tyranny of the *polis*.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid*, p.67.

The fact that the city state system was in decline and would soon give way to the empire building of Alexander probably made it easier for Diogenes to promote his message of indifference toward communitarian values. The retreat of the city state in terms of wealth and power in the political economy of antiquity must have had some impact on tolerance toward philosophers promoting alternative identities. The identity flaunted by Diogenes though, was revolutionary. When asked where he came from, Diogenes replied:

‘I am a citizen of the cosmos’⁸⁴

Diogenes lifted the term cosmos from the astronomical speculations of the Pre-Socratic philosophers and applied it to the realm of human society. He thus became the first person to call himself a cosmopolitan⁸⁵. But the cynicism of Diogenes was very clearly advocating a ‘cosmopolitanism from below’ which was very consciously opposed to the cosmopolis from above that Alexander set out to build through his campaign of imperial war and coercion.

The anecdotes which most people remember, if they have ever heard of Diogenes at all, are from when the lives of Diogenes and Alexander crossed at Corinth. When Alexander arrived at Corinth, its public officials and philosophers came in ‘from all parts’ to pay court to him, but to Alexander’s disappointment Diogenes did not bother and remained where he was in the ‘suburb called the Craneum’ sunning himself. Alexander went to the district and sought Diogenes out:

‘Alexander came and stood next to him and said, “I am Alexander the great king”. “And I”, said he, “am Diogenes the Dog.”’ VI60

The humour of this was not lost on their contemporaries. The meeting dramatises the gulf between two different worldviews. On the one side we have the Western man who personifies the unquenchable thirst for power. On the other we have the Western man who feels his well-being is much better served by loafing around like a dog in the sun:

‘Alexander came and stood over him and said, “ask of me any gift you like.” To which Diogenes replied “stand out of my light”. VI38.

The encounter illustrates the indifference of Diogenes to the political changes which were about to sweep across the ancient Mediterranean and the Near East. Alexander is setting out to be king of the world. Meanwhile, the old man Diogenes has begun to set out his stall as the king of everyday life.

Some people have tried to characterise the philosophy of ancient cynicism as a kind of apathetic hedonism, a lifestyle which shrinks from the sphere of the political. This is why it is important to highlight some of the anecdotes which dramatises the cynical position on slavery – the institution which was the primary contradiction of

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p.65.

⁸⁵ This point is pursued further by John L. Moles, ‘Cynic Cosmopolitanism’, in R. Bracht Branham & Marie-Odile Goulet-Gaze (eds), *The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1996).

classical Western political economy. As we have already intimated, the rationalist philosophers of Greece had a problem. They had a contradiction on their hands which, if repressed into the unconscious, could easily turn into a protracted mental conflict. On the one hand there was a common belief in the principle of the unity of mankind, and on the other there was the empirical observation that a lot of wealth accumulation in Greece was based upon the international institution of slavery. The cynical solution to this problem was very simple and pragmatic. In the early days of his exile Diogenes was accompanied by his slave Manes but, seeing the plummeting socio-economic status toward which Diogenes was heading, Manes decided to run away. When asked why he does not pursue the runaway slave Diogenes replies:

‘It would be absurd if Manes can live without Diogenes, but Diogenes cannot get on without Manes.’⁸⁶

The political ideology behind the slave-master relationship in classical antiquity is overturned. The legitimation of slavery was based on the principle that it was natural for slaves to need a master. As Orlando Patterson notes, Diogenes made an important contribution to the value of freedom in Western culture, because he consciously tried to demonstrate that it could not rationally be based on the institution of slavery:

‘With his notorious sense of irony, Diogenes saw, millennia before Hegel, that in the domination of the slave the master exposes himself to a kind of slavery more real than that of his slave, because he ends up being dependent on him.’⁸⁷

Like the dog who licks his balls, Diogenes is shameless, his humour comes from the plebian gutter. On seeing a master whose shoes were being put on by his slave, Diogenes remarks:

‘You will never be truly happy until he wipes your nose as well; and that will come, when you have lost the use of your hands.’⁸⁸

The critique of slavery then takes another twist when, on a short voyage to Corinth Diogenes is captured by pirates and put up for sale. When asked what he can do so that he may be found a buyer Diogenes replies:

‘Govern men.’⁸⁹

He then tells the crier to ask if anyone would like to purchase a master for himself, and someone does buy him, for the purpose of educating his two sons. The new slave is put in charge of the curriculum. Amongst other things, Diogenes teaches them to wait on themselves.

⁸⁶ Diogenes Laertius, *op cit*, p.57.

⁸⁷ Orlando Patterson, *Freedom: Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*, vol.1 (London, Tauris, 1991), p.185-6.

⁸⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *op cit*, p.47.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p.31.

Salvaging Ancient Cynicism is also pertinent to the third *West under erasure* discourse itemised earlier, namely the discovery of environmental degradation and its impact upon Western conceptions about wealth. Ancient Cynicism is often depicted as a rather ascetic creed, promoting a monkish life of austere abstinence. But this is just not right:

‘When someone declared that life is an evil, Diogenes corrected him: “Not life itself, but living ill.”’⁹⁰

The story is rather of someone who, by force of circumstances, has had to embark upon a rapid downsizing of expectations. For Diogenes, perhaps to his surprise, this appears to have become a very liberating experience. Losing his property in Manes the slave turns out to be not so bad. Diogenes is relieved to discover that he can free himself from his dependency upon Manes. When he arrives in Athens, Diogenes latches on to Antisthenes’ conception of sufficiency and applies it with rigour:

‘Through watching a mouse running about...not looking for a place to lie down in, not afraid of the dark, not seeking any of the things which are considered to be luxuries, he discovered the means of adapting himself to circumstances.’⁹¹

For accommodation, Diogenes begins by improvising a rather dangerously secular joke about a vacancy in its temples by pointing to the portico of Zeus and the Hall of Processions, declaring the Athenians had built him places to live in. It is a play upon his name, meaning ‘from Zeus’. After squatting in these for a while, Diogenes takes up residence in an old tub.

‘One day observing a child drinking out of his hands, he cast away the cup from his wallet with the words, “a child has beaten me in plainness of living.”’⁹²

These anecdotes should be seen as dramatic performances which convey the ideal of sufficiency rather than the piety of poverty. He likened his example to the trainers of choruses who set the note a little high to ensure the rest hit the right note⁹³. Moving toward the cynical goal of sufficiency was more about the feeling of release that comes with shedding wealth which has become an obstacle to happiness than about abstinence. This is a message which has appealed to Westerners for generations, and will be needed again as the Post-Western West gropes toward a new model of well-being that does not cost more than the earth can bear.

What light ancient cynicism might be able to shed upon the modern forms of cynicism identified above? To understand how cynicism mutated into more variegated forms, we would have to begin by travelling to ancient Rome. But now I can already see Diogenes rolling his eyes. Maybe this is a question we shall be able to return to another day. One thing only shall be touched upon here. For ancient cynicism, ethical inquiry was about a commitment to confronting the unvarnished truth, especially where it appears uncomfortable or inexpedient. Reflexive cynicism, projective

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p.57.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, p.25.

⁹² *Ibid*, p.39.

⁹³ *Ibid*, p.37.

cynicism and cathartic cynicism do at least keep this fluttering flame of honesty alive. They provide us with hyperlinks back to the cynicism of Classical Antiquity. But now we should definitely leave the last word to Diogenes:

‘Someone had been reading aloud for a very long time, and when he was very near the end of the roll Diogenes pointed to a space with no writing on it. “Cheer up lads,” cried Diogenes, “there’s land in sight”.’⁹⁴

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p.41.