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Cynicism We Can Believe In

By SIMON CRITCHLEY

SOME 2,300 years after his death, Diogenes the Cynic dramatically interrupted a recent New York State Senate committee meeting. Wearing a long, white beard and carrying his trademark lamp in broad daylight, the ancient philosopher — who once described himself as “a Socrates gone mad” — claimed to be looking for an honest man in politics. Considering the never-ending allegations of financial corruption that flow from the sump of Albany, it’s no surprise that he was unsuccessful.

This resurrected Diogenes was, in fact, Randy Credico, a comedian who says he is considering challenging Senator Charles Schumer in the 2010 Democratic primary. Whatever boost Mr. Credico’s prank provides his campaign, it might also cause us to reflect a little on the meaning of cynicism — and how greatly we still need Diogenes.

Cynicism is actually not at all cynical in the modern sense of the word. It bears no real resemblance to that attitude of negativity and jaded scornfulness that sees the worst of intentions behind the apparent good motives of others.

True cynicism is not a debasement of others but a debasement of oneself — and in that purposeful self-debasement, a protest against corruption, luxury and insincerity. Diogenes, the story goes, was called a “downright dog,” and this so pleased him that the figure of a dog was carved in stone to mark his final resting place. From that epithet, *kunikos* (“dog-like”), cynicism was born.

Diogenes credited his teacher Antisthenes with introducing him to a life of poverty and happiness — of poverty as happiness. The cynic’s every word and action was dedicated to the belief that the path to individual freedom required absolute honesty and complete material austerity.

So Diogenes threw away his cup when he saw people drinking from their hands. He lived in a barrel, rolling in it over hot sand in the summer. He inured himself to cold by embracing statues blanketed with snow. He ate raw squid to avoid the trouble of cooking. He mocked the auctioneer while being sold into slavery.

When asked by Lysias the pharmacist if he believed in the gods, he replied, “How can I help believing in them when I see a god-forsaken wretch like you?” When he was asked what was the right time to marry, he said, “For a young man not yet, for an old man never at all.” When asked what was the most beautiful thing in the world, Diogenes replied, “Freedom of speech.” Sadly, it remains one of the most dangerous.

And when asked where he came from, this native of Sinope, in what is now Turkey, replied that he was a “citizen of the world,” or *kosmopolites*. If only today’s self-styled cosmopolitans drank water from their

hands, hugged statues and lived in barrels, one might ponder. Truth be told, Diogenes' "cosmopolitanism" is much more of an anti-political stance than the sort of banal internationalism that people associate with the word today.

Cynicism is basically a moral protest against hypocrisy and cant in politics and excess and thoughtless self-indulgence in the conduct of life. In a world like ours, which is slowly trying to rouse itself from the dogmatic slumbers of boundless self-interest, corruption, lazy cronyism and greed, it is Diogenes' lamp that we need to light our path. Perhaps this recession will make cynics of us all.

Simon Critchley, the chairman of the philosophy department at the New School, is the author of "The Book of Dead Philosophers."

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