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Sound and smell of a philosophy

Diogenes the Cynic made the city his classroom

By Costica Bradatan

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A detail of "Diogenes Searching for an Honest Man" by Jacob Jordaens, c.1642 | © Artefact/Alamy

IN THIS REVIEW

THE DANGEROUS LIFE OF DIOGENES THE CYNIC
Translated by Malcolm DeBevoise
208pp. Oxford University Press. £14.99 (US $19.95).
Jean-Manuel Roubineau

Imagine, if you can, a fat philosopher. In theory you can, but it wouldn't be easy. For the prevailing view of philosophy, in the West at least, is that of an eminently discarnate affair. Philosophers are angelic creatures, all ideas and no flesh, their bodies translucently slim and their heads in the clouds. On this view philosophers feed, if at all, on long fasts and thin air. So imagine the sensation caused by Michel Onfray's book *Le ventre des philosophes* (1989), in which he took a closer look at what philosophers (Diogenes, Rousseau, Kant, Nietzsche and others) put into their mouth and how that affected their thinking. The title of the English version is slightly less flavourful, but you still get the gist: *Appetites for Thought: Philosophers and food*.

Enter Jean-Manuel Roubineau. In the same distinguished French tradition he examines in detail not only what Diogenes had for dinner, but so much more: his physical appearance and public persona, his social interactions and his travels, the places where he parked his storage jar and in general all the material circumstances of his life. There is something doubly refreshing about this approach. First, such a down-to-earth treatment is appropriate for the uncompromising materialist philosopher that Diogenes was. When

Plato loftily theorized on man as a "featherless biped", earning the applause of everybody in the audience, Diogenes reportedly "plucked the feathers from a cock, brought it to Plato's school, and said, 'Here is Plato's man'". Proudly calling himself a "dog" and his doctrine a "dog's philosophy" ("cynic" comes from the Greek *kynikos*, dog-like), Diogenes was the ultimate mundane thinker. Socrates may have "brought philosophy down to earth", but it was Diogenes who put down-to-earthness firmly at its core.

Second, and beyond the strict limits of Diogenes' case, this is a compelling study in the anthropology, sociology and political economy of philosophy. No matter how ethereal philosophers sometimes appear, philosophy does not happen in ether, but in a certain political and economic environment, and in specific social and cultural settings. All this "mundaneness", which leaves an imprint on what philosophers end up saying, is usually ignored by the historians of philosophy, for whom abstract ideas are everything. In this context Roubineau's book comes as a generous breath of fresh air.

The Dangerous Life and Ideas of Diogenes the Cynic is a rich, carefully woven historical tapestry out of which Diogenes' philosophical profile emerges more forcefully than in other recent accounts of his life. Roubineau has a gift for rendering the abstract in concrete forms; in his book we see and hear and even smell Diogenes in his natural habitat. Since cynicism was primarily performance – bodily performance – the body for Diogenes was the site of any authentic philosophizing, a "mode of demonstration that was worth more than any treatise".

Cynicism was an eminently urban phenomenon. Diogenes "made the city his classroom". Walking in Socrates' footsteps, wherever he went Diogenes initiated conversations: "in the public square and the buildings that surrounded it … in the main street and under the arcades, where he enjoyed walking, debating, casting dice or knucklebones". The cynics were the first "cosmopolites" – apparently Diogenes coined the term. There is something unforgettable about the scene Roubineau depicts of a group of cynic philosophers *en marche*. Savagely individualistic as they purported to be, they all displayed the same "uniform". Apart from the cloak they carried a walking stick and a leather traveling bag – "emblems of the itinerant condition of mendicant philosophers".

Diogenes did not limit himself to just "developing a theoretical argument", but was determined to "work out its practical implications and then to act on them through a series of radical choices, notably the decision to live by begging". Much of his biography was shaped by his choice to remain destitute. Historians of philosophy mention Diogenes' begging, in passing, but Roubineau makes it central to his philosophical project and dwells on its deeper significance and long-term consequences. A life of mendicancy and impoverishment in Diogenes' time, he writes, amounted to "both a psychological and physical ordeal". The ancient Greeks tended to liken beggars to parasites, and "whatever small assistance they received was furnished only very episodically by persons who feared that they themselves were in danger of becoming beggars".

A life of begging, including for those who opted for it as a matter of philosophical conviction, was precarious indeed. In a way the beggar was "lower even than the slave, who, by virtue of belonging to a household, was protected by his master in proportion to the capital he represented and the affection he inspired". Having chosen such a life, it's reasonable to suspect that Diogenes exposed himself to "attacks of every kind". He was regularly "sworn at, tripped up and sent sprawling, beaten". Through all that barking and boasting, then, and despite his threatening appearance and biting irony, Diogenes was in fact, like many dogs, hiding a great vulnerability.

***Costica Bradatan** is an author and professor. His latest book,* In Praise of Failure: Four lessons in humility*, came out earlier this year*

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