

Key Contemporary Thinkers

# SLOTERDIJK

jean-pierre couture

# Sloterdijk

Jean-Pierre Couture

polity

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## Abbreviations

AP	<i>The Art of Philosophy</i>
B	<i>Spheres I: Bubbles</i>
CCR	<i>Critique of Cynical Reason</i>
ET	<i>Eurotaoismus</i>
GZ	<i>God's Zeal: The Battle of the Three Monotheisms</i>
ISB	<i>Im selben Boot</i>
KMPA	<i>Kopernikanische Mobilmachung und ptolemäische Abrüstung</i>
LOL	<i>Literatur und Organisation von Lebenserfahrung</i>
MCL	<i>You Must Change Your Life</i>
NA	<i>Nietzsche Apostle</i>
NG	<i>Nicht gerettet</i>
RHZ	<i>"Rules for the Human Zoo"</i>
RNU	<i>Reflexionen eines nicht mehr Unpolitischen</i>
RT	<i>Rage and Time</i>
SII	<i>Sphären II: Globen</i>
SIII	<i>Sphären III: Schäume</i>
SV	<i>Selbstversuch</i>
TA	<i>Terror from the Air</i>
TPWP	<i>Theory of the Post-War Periods</i>
TS	<i>Thinker on Stage</i>
WF	<i>Weltfremdheit</i>
WIC	<i>In the World Interior of Capital</i>
ZB	<i>Der Zauberbaum</i>
ZT	<i>Zeilen und Tage</i>
ZWK	<i>Zur Welt kommen</i>

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## Introduction

Interpreting an author's work during his or her lifetime is not without its many challenges. One does not have the luxury of either a definitive corpus or the passive silence of authors who are no longer with us. This said, an exhaustive introduction to Peter Sloterdijk is a needed and legitimate undertaking. Since the first decade of the 2000s, his newly translated works have piqued the interest of an English-speaking public that had not really followed his thought beyond the 1980s. Jochen Schulte-Sasse (1940–2012) introduced Sloterdijk to the English-speaking world when, in the series he edited at the University of Minnesota Press, *Critique of Cynical Reason* was published in 1987, quickly followed by *Thinker on Stage* in 1989. Following a gap of two decades in the reception and translation of Sloterdijk's work, three English-language publishers – Polity, Semiotext(e), and Columbia University Press – have all had a hand in the recent effort. This critical work took shape around publications edited by Stuart Elden: the special issue (co-edited with Eduardo Mendieta and Nigel Thrif) of *Society and Space* in 2009 and the *Sloterdijk Now* collection in 2012. Along with these substantive contributions, the Dutch philosopher Sjoerd van Tuinen was one of the first to critically study Sloterdijk's work, and the German author Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs published a general introduction to Sloterdijk's thought in 2011.<sup>1</sup> The present book seeks to relate the rise of this distinguished contemporary philosopher and notorious public intellectual by drawing out the vivacity of both his recent and older published work. In doing so, it hopes to enable a wider reading public to navigate his fertile and at times provocative intellectual output.

This exercise is critical in nature. As such, I often overlook Sloterdijk's self-descriptions or his occasional shots across the bows of the influential commentators or translators of his work whose judgment or mere stupidity he fears:

One of the distinctive signs of the thought of our times is to have questioned the concept of the author. Among other things, this thought is in the process of suppressing the theological ballast that had been used to support the idea of the old Europe, that is, the human paternity of intellectual production. Since then, contemporary authors, perhaps more so than their historical predecessors, have had reasons and opportunities to examine the abysmal difference between their personal intentions and how their work is received.<sup>2</sup>

By their very nature, the secrets of intentions are impossible to plumb. I therefore concentrate on texts, their arguments and their contributions, the debates to which they gave rise and the softening of some of the biting arguments after their initial formulation. Though the behind-the-scenes publication intrigues and battles to the death in Germany's intellectual landscape are discussed in chapter 4, it should be noted that they color several remarks throughout the book. The reason is that Sloterdijk constantly redraws the boundaries between provocation and theory by sitting astride a hybrid beast composed of art and philosophy, which he refers to as centauric literature. Lastly, my political science background often leads me to assess Sloterdijk's arguments in political and ideological terms as they unfold in debates in which he has willingly participated. If there is a constant in these few political discords, it touches upon the intrinsic limits of Sloterdijk's project; that is, the fact that he so strongly describes his work as emerging from Nietzsche can only put it on a collision course with the foundations of democracy. Like his forerunner, Sloterdijk neither is nor wants to be a theorist of equality. Far from rejecting the fecundity of this provocative, dissensual body of work, this remark seeks only to disclose my own reservations and my own fears. More serenely, I do not think that the collective reception of Sloterdijk's thought will prevent him from perhaps attaining the ranks of those essential thinkers whose works are forever discussed. Indeed, "classic texts are those that survive their interpretations" (TS 3).

Born in 1947 in Karlsruhe, Germany, Sloterdijk studied philosophy and German literature in Munich and Hamburg before shifting his interest to structuralism and the thought of Michel Foucault. In 1976, he completed his doctoral research on autobiographical material produced in Weimar Germany. Afterwards, he disappeared momentarily from the intellectual scene and permanently from the world of academic philosophy.

Around 1980, Sloterdijk spent some time in Poona, India, at an ashram that was home to Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh's sect. Born as Rajneesh Chandra Mohanin in 1931, "Bhagwan" (the "divine") previously taught philosophy and psychology at the University of Jalapur.

At his Poona ashram, he directed an institute for comparative research on religions that attracted tens of thousands of Westerners between 1974 and 1981. Following his move to Oregon in the United States, "Bhagwan," who had changed his name to "Osho," showed his darker side when he became the guru of an oppressive sect. On the heels of problems with the FBI, he returned to Poona, where he died in 1990. Sloterdijk regularly returns to both his Poona experiences and Bhagwan, whom he ranked among the twentieth century's four greatest proponents of Indian spirituality (MCL 280). As a testament, no doubt, to Bhagwan's formative influence on the younger Sloterdijk, the lessons learned in Poona are never far removed from the theoretical stances adopted in his later thought: release of the body, anti-kinetic slowness, post-rational breathing, pre-individualist fusion, and athletic exercise in vertical tension.

The two volumes of *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* (*Critique of Cynical Reason*) were published in 1983. With this inaugural work, Sloterdijk immediately imposed himself as the author of a cult book that sold more than 120,000 copies in Germany before being translated into English in 1987. It remains post-war German philosophy's greatest success. A new philosopher had been born, who then began to craft a cycle of psychopolitical works focused on the spirit of his times.

Associated with the 1968 intellectual generation, referred to as "APO" (*Außerparlamentarische Opposition*; i.e., Extra-Parliamentary Opposition), Sloterdijk participated in neither the Marxist nor the anarchist or left-wing terrorist fringe, but rather in the hedonist fringe. This counter-cultural trait would subsequently lead him to comb through the legacy of Romanticism for the conditions of a Dionysian materialism arising out of the necessary rejection of critical theory.

Indeed, Sloterdijk came to want to sever all ties with the Frankfurt School as he intensified his efforts to find resources in the works of Nietzsche and Heidegger for a genuinely frontal critique of modernity. This project would have been impossible without the efforts of a few forerunners who had been working since the early 1960s on remodeling the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger within the framework of the consumer society. These forerunners are from France and took their inspiration from Henri Lefebvre and Jean Beaufret. Going against all orthodox thought, Lefebvre attempted to create a dialogue between Marx and Nietzsche in addition to contributing to the birth of a philosophy of space. For his part, Beaufret paved the way for introducing Heidegger's thought in France. His efforts were soon exploited and amplified by a subsequent generation personified by Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy.

France is Sloterdijk's adopted intellectual homeland.<sup>3</sup> Like Heine in the mid-nineteenth century, he has worked at making German thought known in France and French thought known in Germany. The

flow of this trade route across the Rhine is perhaps tilted in the latter direction because he ardently wants to make up for Germany's lag in appreciating the contributions of Nietzsche and Heidegger to contemporary thought about emancipation. The libertarian-slanted reappropriation of the Nietzschean and Heideggerian canons has been the accepted reading by French poststructuralists such as Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida, and it is for this reason that Sloterdijk's adoption of this posture rightly saw him labeled as the "most French-leaning of German philosophers."<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, Sloterdijk's relationship with France is both friendly and close. He spends a good part of each year in France and maintains a place in a network of influential thinkers. He periodically collaborates with notable conservative thinkers such as Alain Finkielkraut<sup>5</sup> and Régis Debray,<sup>6</sup> and has developed a long-lasting friendship with Bruno Latour, who has contributed significantly to making Sloterdijk's work known in France.<sup>7</sup> Although Sloterdijk did not have the opportunity to meet Foucault before the latter's early demise in 2004, he assigns him an important place in his work and takes inspiration from his last classes at the Collège de France in his thoughts about ethics (MCL 148–59). Lastly, Sloterdijk mourned the death of Derrida in 1984 by immediately paying homage to the Derridian specter, which he links with figures from the past and present-day friendships.<sup>8</sup>

This closeness, however, is not without a few disagreements and disappointments. In 2005, for example, Sloterdijk bitterly reproached the French left for refusing to accept the European constitution project even though Germany had supported it. This disagreement also led him to say that the Franco-German partnership had faded somewhat in the general indifference to the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the Franco-German treaty of friendship, signed by Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle in 1963. Although he was named *Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* of the French Republic in 2006, Sloterdijk quickly began to lament this shared indifference, which he claimed could be viewed as a consolation prize given to long-lasting peace. At the very least, his tender sarcasm recommends the virtues of shared indifference to all countries at war:

Do it the same way that we did, don't be too interested in each other! And be careful how you choose your foreign correspondents for the newspapers, make sure that those reporting from neighbouring countries are sure to bore their readers to death! Only in this way can those happily separated from one another live in friendship and peace with each other. (TPWP 49)

Although he is more often than not disappointed with the politics of his times, which he views as lacking vision and ambition, it needs to

be noted that Sloterdijk's intellectual trajectory is lacking in neither. He was appointed as rector in 2001 of the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design, a setting that provides him with a research laboratory in which contemporary thought, aesthetic theory, and visual arts work side by side. Under the supervision of his friends and collaborators Boris Groys and Peter Weibel, the university regularly organizes important exhibitions that explore the fertile nature of the meeting of these fields.<sup>9</sup> The iconoclastic nature of this school has certainly provided Sloterdijk's philosophical undertaking with a creative physical and mental space and a freedom of inquiry unbounded by the imperatives of university specialization. Indeed, Sloterdijk explores the possibilities of writing that brings together form and content, literature and philosophy, and art and thought within the framework of an undertaking that operates as much in terms of expressiveness as of permissiveness. To be sure, he has taken advantage of his considerable institutional independence to construct a research climate free from academic auto-censorship. Moreover, he openly mistrusts the milieu of professional philosophy, which, he says, now settles for "avoiding mistakes" and "minimizing declarations":

Today philosophy is at its most professional when it may explain how it would say something, in the extraordinary case that it would say something. However, it is far too reflexive to say anything; it is afraid of relevant worldviews like a child fears the fire s/he touched once. Instead, from the earlier love of wisdom a multinational concern specialized in error avoidance has emerged, which promises security as a first principle. Modern philosophy achieves its highest goal in speaking most minimally and in its refrainment from too far-fetched statements.<sup>10</sup>

This extra-academic position certainly enables him to enjoy the largesse of an exploratory and speculative approach that is not accountable to the surveillance of an unlettered dean.

This considerable autonomy recalls Albert William Levi's description of the era of gentlemen in early modern times. Before the age of professionals of academic philosophy, these gentlemen generated and invested their cultural capital outside of universities sponsored then by theology and now by impact factor management.<sup>11</sup> Sloterdijk's reputation is made up from various forms of capital and redefines the framework of intellectual engagement. From 2002 to 2012, he co-hosted, along with his good friend Rüdiger Safranski, *Das philosophische Quartett*, a monthly television program broadcast on the German ZDF network. As a public intellectual, he never refuses interview requests from major German media outlets on matters relating to current affairs. Moreover, he is regularly solicited by high-level authorities to advise public servants. Lastly, his books are not only bestsellers, but also feats of erudition and literary quality that have

earned him prestigious awards: the Ernst Robert Curtius Prize for Essay Writing (1993), the Christian Kellerer Prize for the future of philosophical thought (2001), the Austrian Decoration for Science and Art (2005), and the Sigmund Freud Prize for Scientific Prose (2005), awarded in the past to Hannah Arendt, Hans Georg Gadamer, and Jürgen Habermas.

Sloterdijk views his work as a medicine of civilization, willing intoxication and theory of immersion. His essays are both literary and philosophical; they come at times from the angle of very concise, philosophy-based commentaries on a political conjuncture, and at other times reveal themselves as much more ambitious, nearly-1,000-page opuses. For Sloterdijk, philosophy is about storytelling and forms: the author's capacity for expression at several levels simultaneously (philosophical erudition and working within the framework of canons, mixed with the irony and humor of a metaphorical language accessible to an educated public and non-professional philosophers) and the regular use of iconography (many images projected over and alongside a discourse and which themselves present an argument) all bear witness to his singularity. Yet there is nothing certain about merging entertainment and knowledge. Sloterdijk is indeed entertaining, but does he philosophize? For many observers, therein lies the question.

This book has five main chapters, each of which covers one of the five approaches used in Sloterdijk's work. Chapter 1 draws out the initial motives underlying his work devoted to the study of cultural crises or psychopolitics. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on the anthropological and spatial narratives that support the Great Narrative of the human adventure. This story of anthropotechnics and spherology is strongly impregnated with Heideggerian thought, which Sloterdijk explores in an unprecedented manner. This positioning within the thought of Freiburg and the grandiloquence of Nietzsche would inevitably lead Sloterdijk to a confrontation with the Frankfurt School. In chapter 4, the quarrels with Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth shed light on Sloterdijk's ideological coordinates. This controversy reveals above all a change in the German intellectual landscape within which Sloterdijk had irrevocably taken his place. Chapter 5 provides an impressionistic portrait of Sloterdijk's panoply of therapeutic prescriptions. This *pharmakon*, supportive of an alter-modernity, oscillates between a re-enactment of Epicurean retreat, recreating the enclosure of a healthy, sustainable microcity, on the one hand, and the virtues of strong belonging, undermining the supremacy of bourgeois, bellicose, and greedy subjectivity, on the other. The book's conclusion adds a couple of nuances to the portrait of Sloterdijk's work by situating it within the framework of serene observation and serendipity.

Sloterdijk is the creator of a corpus whose *raison d'être* is to prevent the disappearance of philosophy's *eros* to the sole benefit of scholarly sobriety. Even though he severely criticizes social democracy and the idea of social equality, he deplores the rarefaction of the public's role in philosophy as the perpetual questioning of conventional wisdom. As such, his work shows us that this Nietzsche of the biotech era wants paradoxically to philosophize in the street in the heart of the city and amid his fellow citizens, even if doing so means suffering the occasional rebuke: "Philosophers have only flattered society in various ways; what is important now is to provoke it."<sup>12</sup>

## Psychopolitics

"Every critique is pioneering work on the pain of the times (*Zeitschmerz*) and a piece of exemplary healing" (CCR xxxvi). In *Critique of Cynical Reason* and intermittently throughout the corpus of his work, Sloterdijk casts himself as a *Zeitdiagnostiker*, a "specialist physician of the pathologies of the opinion apparatus" (ZT 22). In this self-assigned role, he seeks to decode the prevailing mental illnesses of his time and to prescribe a cure for the consequences of having overlooked the diagnosis. In this chapter, the three symptoms analyzed – cynicism, mobilization, and rage – correspond to the following psychopolitical works: *Critique of Cynical Reason*, *Eurotaoisismus*, and *Rage and Time*.<sup>1</sup> Before examining these works, it is important to tease out the Nietzschean epistemological horizon of Sloterdijk's psychopolitical approach.

### Psychopolitics as rejection of historicism

Sloterdijk's psychopolitical inquiry emerges out of his doctoral thesis on autobiographical narratives in the Weimar Republic.<sup>2</sup> He describes these life stories as a "form of social praxis" (LOL 6) that reveal the mental structure of a state of society via the so-called subjective and objective outpourings of individuals. Psychopolitics thus assumes that psychological moods are qualities that can be transferred from individuals to collectivities and vice versa. This transference (*Übertragung*), taken from the vocabulary of psychoanalysis, is, moreover, at the very heart of Sloterdijk's relationship with time and space and with stories and territories that he synchronizes or superposes by means of transmigration.

These processes were also explored in *Der Zauberbaum* (*The Magic Tree*), Sloterdijk's one and only novel. At the book's end, the protagonist Jan van Leyden, an assistant to the hypnotist Marquis de Puységur at

the time of the French Revolution, enters the body of Sigmund Freud in his Berggasse office in Vienna (ZB 318–22). This allusion to the fantasies of occultism is not coincidental, insofar as it exemplifies one aspect of Sloterdijk's particular talent and frivolity, when he sets about aligning significant cultural moments with one another and inserting himself into them as a key author. It is worth recalling in this regard that he wrote the preface to *Critique of Cynical Reason* in the summer of 1981 on the occasion of the bicentenary of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (CCR xxx), that his novel on the "discovery of psychoanalysis in 1785"<sup>3</sup> was uncoincidentally published in 1985, and that it was he who was chosen by the Nietzsche-Archiv to give a talk at Weimar on August 25, 2000, the hundredth anniversary of the death of Nietzsche (NA). It was this same Nietzsche who was the first philosopher to be discussed in the *Critique of Cynical Reason* (CCR xxvii–xxix), the first to whom Sloterdijk dedicated a scholarly book (TS), and whom he still defends with the utmost ardour and clarity.<sup>4</sup>

Psychopolitical transference seeks to draw out homologous mental structures among epochs and times far removed from one another. Nietzsche's imprint in this regard will be discussed later. For the moment, however, it is worth noting that Sloterdijk's psychopolitics postulates the synchronicity of certain periods when their moods are concordant with one another. History is neither a continuous nor a discontinuous series of mental or cultural states. Rather, it is a serpentine air duct able to establish contact, via improbable airlocks, between atmospheres accidentally separated in time.

In a short text with the strange though revealing title "Weimar and California,"<sup>5</sup> Sloterdijk argues that psychopolitics inserts itself as a cure for the omnipotence of the historicism that saturated Germany in the 1970s, because this rebirth of the philosophy of history was unfit to serve as a "therapeutic compensation for collective identity crises."<sup>6</sup> The reason, notes Sloterdijk, is that modern philosophies of history (liberalism, Hegelianism, and Marxism) are unable to answer the vital questions: "Who are we really and how should we live?"<sup>7</sup> Because of this failure, he links the mood of the Weimar Republic to that of California in the 1980s. The public's widespread infatuation with a vocabulary of crisis – including pain, loss, social decadence, mistrust of the world, denegation, restoration, and escape into the absolutely new – appears to call upon the same solution in both cases, namely, "dissonance and emptiness" and hurried patchworks of new syntheses that annihilate critical thought.<sup>8</sup> The danger here is that these climates could ultimately foster the increased importance of fatal charismatic figures "as if our own past flowed once again towards us."<sup>9</sup>

Sloterdijk is not speaking as an historian but on behalf of an art form – that of the historical virtuoso – able to attain the "suprahistorical" dimension that Nietzsche prescribed as the cure for the excesses of the

science of history. In his *Untimely Meditations*, Nietzsche argues that historicism is hostile to life and youth, that is, to the creative instinct of art: "In producing this effect, history is the antithesis of art: and only if history can endure to be transformed into a work of art will it perhaps be able to preserve instincts or even evoke them."<sup>10</sup> Sloterdijk fully subscribes to Nietzsche's diagnosis and wholly endorses the idea that life is prey to forces contrary to its vital impulse: "It is sick with many illnesses and not only with the memory of its chain – what chiefly concerns us here is that it is suffering from the *malady of history*. Excess of history has attacked life's plastic powers, it no longer knows how to employ the past as a nourishing food."<sup>11</sup>

For Nietzsche and Sloterdijk, this looming evil can be countered only by the hardness of the historical virtuoso, who becomes the hero through whom art and history are reunited in the suprahistorical. This virtuoso "has developed in himself such a tenderness and susceptibility of feeling that nothing human is alien to him; the most various ages and persons continue to sound in kindred notes on the strings of his lyre."<sup>12</sup> Going to the heart of Sloterdijk's light-hearted and creative relationship with the seriousness of the discipline of history, this passage helps us to understand why he would rather explore the passageways and other airlocks between and among epochs and why he allows himself to fold space and annihilate time.

In sum, psychopolitics is a fully Nietzschean undertaking that, in light of Sloterdijk's foundational inquiry into cynicism, would make Nietzsche a very timely author, given that, in 1874, he had already written: "[t]he oversaturation of an age with history . . . leads [it] into a dangerous mood of irony in regard to itself and subsequently into the even more dangerous mood of cynicism."<sup>13</sup>

## Cynicism

"Cynicism is *enlightened false consciousness*. It is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has laboured both successfully and in vain" (CCR 5). *Critique of Cynical Reason* is a composite book (26 chapters and 10 excursions accompanied by 40 illustrations) that presents itself as a study of mores and mentalities. It is Sloterdijk's fundamental psychopolitical work and for this reason must be discussed at length here, all the more so since it is reviewed and amended in his subsequent works. In it, he provides a critical review of the Enlightenment, which, he argues, has not led to the promised emancipation. The spectrum of this review ranges from the darkest to the lightest and most glowing tones as Sloterdijk seeks to separate the best from the worst in the 200-year-old tradition of criticism. The thesis of this eclectic work maintains that late modernity has given birth to