

# The Shape of Things

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Peter Sloterdijk. *Bubbles: Spheres Volume I: Microspherology*. Trans. Wieland Hoban. Semiotext(e), 2011. 664pp.

For anyone even remotely interested in philosophy, when a figure sets out to “correct” Heidegger, you want to pay attention. This is not necessarily out of admiration for the author of *Being and Time*, or his ideas, but rather out of a genuine curiosity made up of equal parts amazement and horror. The interest would be compulsory, akin to intellectual rubbernecking, for it is more than likely that he or she, the subject of such an utterance, will, like Heidegger, be vulnerable to intense scrutiny and interpretation. Therefore, when MIT Press describes the much-anticipated *Spheres* trilogy by Peter Sloterdijk as “the late-twentieth-century bookend to Heidegger’s *Being and Time*,” there is reasonable expectation for it to be disastrous.

Ever since the English translation of his *The Critique of Cynical Reason* in 1988, Sloterdijk has been known in English-speaking intellectual circles as somewhat of a mercurial figure. Not much, still, is known about him. From where, that is, what intellectual milieu or tradition, did he emerge? Is he a Frankfurt guy? Is he a Luhmannite? Is he Heideggerian? The rather out-of-nowhere character of Sloterdijk’s work, as well as the inconsistent reception of his work outside a handful of watchers of developments in continental philosophy and social theory, placed Sloterdijk in the category of “heard of him” (otherwise known as “oh right, he wrote that one thing”) in North American cultural theory.

But Sloterdijk’s trajectory differed tremendously in his native Germany. When copies of *Cynical Reason* started leaving the shelves at a rapid pace upon its release, the then-journalist was boosted into the highbrow German intellectual scene traditionally filled with academics. Today, we can count Sloterdijk among the country’s public intellectuals, a group that also includes luminaries like Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth (more on these two later). Sloterdijk is also host to a show called “Das Philosophische Quartett” (The Philosophical Quartet), which airs on ZDF, the German equivalent to PBS in the United States or NHK in Japan. It features Sloterdijk alongside guests of various intellectual pedigrees, from academics to journalists.

More recently, Sloterdijk has made himself known among the wider American reading

public for a controversy involving welfare state politics, class, *ressentiment* and Axel Honneth. As a blog post on the *Global Post* summarizes:

According to an article published this past summer in one of Germany's most widely read newspapers, the country's welfare state is a "fiscal kleptocracy" that has transformed the country into a "swamp of resentment" and degraded its citizens into "mystified subjects of tax law." The text, by philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, goes on in that vein for some 3,000 words[...]

Among the country's intellectual class, the article has served as kindling for a fiercely fought and wide-ranging conversation about the national economy that, six months on, still shows little sign of abating. (Abadi)

The article, entitled "Die Revolution der gebenden Hand" ("The Revolution of the Grasping Hand"), must be read as a polemic. While it includes some semblance of genealogical (in the Foucauldian sense) analysis of the modern democratic welfare state, its primary purpose is to offend. He begins with a meditation on the birth of the democratic state as the compromise between classical liberalism and anarchism, each of which was amenable to the declining significance of the state. For liberalism, the state needed to be minimal and imperceptible to its subjects, the citizens. For anarchism, the state needed to be destroyed. Hence, the "modern democratic state gradually transformed into the debtor state, within the space of a century metastasizing into a colossal monster—one that breathes and spits out money" (Sloterdijk, "The Grasping Hand"). For a Europe that is currently under much economic turmoil, and with a Germany that is currently embroiled in a national debate, hinging in large part on a parochial stance toward Southern Europe as fiscally irresponsible debtees, about whether to "bail out" Greece and Spain, this article, for many of its critics, amounted basically to "piling on." Further, according to its critics, it preyed on extant, albeit latent, nationalist sentiment, which culminated in the infamous book by Thilo Sarrazin, which all but placed the entirety of Germany's economic woes on its immigrants.

This was the context for the retort by Honneth, one of the last remaining flag bearers of the Frankfurt School. There he accused Sloterdijk of, among many things, being an ideological mouthpiece for advanced capitalism, "a mystical or speculative [interpreter] of history and the world," and, rather strangely, a reader of Michel Foucault.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> While most of this exchange never made it to English-language publications, much of it has been chronicled on blogs. See Gregersen, Thomas. "Axel Honneth Versus Peter Sloterdijk." *Political Theory - Habermas and Rawls*. 26 Sept. 2009. Web. 25 Sept. 2012; Shingleton, Cameron. "The Great Stage: Axel Honneth: Against Sloterdijk (Die Zeit, 24 September, 2009)." *The Great Stage*. 11 Feb. 2010. 25 Sept. 2012.

The gist of Honneth's critique, which I cannot fully assess in this space, is that Sloterdijk has taken *ressentiment* as "first psychology" of the lower classes and has attempted to pull the rug from up under the very foundations of European liberal democracy—the welfare state—by criticizing it. I bring up Honneth's public spat with Sloterdijk in order to portray a picture of the latter that presents not only his prominence in the German intellectual scene but also his embattled public image. While Sloterdijk may only recently be gaining mass recognition in North America, he has, in Europe, at least, been a visible presence for the past two decades or so.

For Sloterdijk, the problematic of inhabitation is that which courses through the veins of Western metaphysics and philosophy. The "old cosmology of ancient Europe," as he calls it, "that rested on equating the house and home with the world," can be seen in even the disparate philosophies of Hegel and Heidegger. Humans in this view were "inhabitants in a crowded building called cosmos" (Sloterdijk, "Spheres Theory"). As it was for his most obvious predecessor, Gaston Bachelard, the motif of the house—signifying order, unity and certainty—is one that unduly holds too much purchase in the West. For Sloterdijk, the Enlightenment should have dispelled the need for a "universal house in order to find the world a place worthy of inhabiting" (Ibid.). Yet, it remains, thanks in part to philosophers such as Heidegger, whose self-proclaimed task to "end metaphysics" as such did not do away with the, if we can call it something, the "metaphysics of the universal house." Sloterdijk's project, therefore, in his three-volume study called *Spheres*, is to forge a path beyond Heidegger, by providing a general theory of "associations."

For Heidegger, the overarching question of metaphysics was temporal—with the keywords "being" and "becoming." For Sloterdijk, it is spatial; the keyword is "world." While it is the case that Sloterdijk views Heidegger to have been wrong all along, there is something about the current technological, socio-political moment that has occasioned a particular response. Sloterdijk writes:

It's the final stage of a process that began in the epoch of Greek philosophical cosmology, and whose present vectors are rapid transportation as well as ultra-high-speed telecommunication. At the same time, it's the product of a radical disappointment, whereby human beings had to abandon the privilege of inhabiting a real cosmos—which is to say, a closed and comforting world. The cosmos, such as the Greeks conceived it, was the totality of being imagined under the form of a great, perfectly symmetrical bubble. Aristotle and his followers were responsible for this idea of a cosmos composed of concentric, celestial spheres of increasing diameters, the majority of which consisted of a hypothetical material they called ether. For us, this model of the world is obviously no longer operational. (Sloterdijk, "Foreword to the Theory of Spheres" 223)

In response to this “inoperability,”<sup>2</sup> Sloterdijk offers a “spherology,” beginning from the micro, which is the subject of volume I of *Spheres* entitled *Bubbles*, all the way to the macro, the subject of volume III, entitled *Foams*. Sphere, for Sloterdijk, does not assume a totality or finality as the phenomenologically inflected “lifeworld” or “world” entails. As he puts it rather paradoxically, “the primordial existential sphere is created every time a moment of inter-psychic space happens” (Sloterdijk, “Foreword to the Theory of Spheres” 223–224). Against the weight of “existence,” Sloterdijk puts forth a succession of events, of happenings, wherein meaningful and significant connections are made but do not suffocate. Hence, the microspherology he presents in *Bubbles*, the volume under review, is, at root, a theory of “atmosphere” or as he likes to say, of “air.” He chooses these ethereal metaphors as he believes that spheres, the closest Heideggerian cognate being *Stimmung* (more on this later), “never speak but...brings everything together and makes everything possible...a treasure that that allowed human beings to realize the fact that they’re always already immersed in something almost imperceptible and yet very real, and that this space of immersion dominates the changing states of the soul down to its most intimate modifications” (Sloterdijk, “Foreword to the Theory of Spheres” 225).

The development of this “spatial vocabulary” is necessary, therefore, because the concept of “world” is simply too bulky to do anything analytically. “Sphere” works better for several reasons. For one, it is more in tune with the development of modernity, which is characterized by “the increasing removal of safety structures from the traditional theological and cosmological narratives” (Sloterdijk, *Bubbles* 25) that used to provide human subjectivity with a degree of ontological security by providing human beings a place in the world, which was fixed, identifiable and orientating. Yet, these “safety structures” in the form of “worlds,” according to Sloterdijk, remained. While the emergence of the Figure of Man, allowed for humans to become the subject *and* object of knowledge, the “empirico-transcendental” as Foucault so rightly put it, it did not mean the complete “end of metaphysics.” It just diverted the sublimated energy. “People,” Sloterdijk precisely notes, “no longer wanted to receive their inspired ideas from embarrassing heavens” (Sloterdijk, *Bubbles* 28). Instead of God, these ideas came from within, so to speak, albeit mediated via technology, which reflected the “distance between what God was capable of in *illo tempore* and what humans will, in time, themselves be capable of” (37). Hence, supposedly secular models of subjectivity that emerged in the wake of the scientific revolutions of Galileo, Copernicus and later Newton, nonetheless remained closely tied to the *imago Dei*. The image of man *as* God simply shifted the flow of power from one end to another. It did not reconsti-

<sup>2</sup> One cannot but help to think of the continual resonance between Sloterdijk’s project and the recent work of Jean-Luc Nancy. This is the case not only with the recent work by Nancy on religious themes and globalization but also his earlier work on “communality” and “singular plurality.”

tute the very elements of the prior cosmological system. The shape of the world, even after the emergence of the Figure of Man, did not much change.

But it was not just the shape of the system that did not budge, but rather the way things in it related to one another. While Sloterdijk takes much care to provide various illustrations having to do with the contours of what he is describing, he is in fact attempting to describe relationality. One could even go so far as to say that for him the way in which certain elements in a system relate—let us call this the “relational quantum”—gives the system itself shape. Thus to call something “foam,” “bubble,” or “sphere” is really an attempt by Sloterdijk to theorize a “connecting force.” Spheres, then, are “the original product of human coexistence.” In other words, spheres form out of the relations of certain existing ontological objects, or as Sloterdijk tends to call them, “nobjects.” Spheres therefore are unlike environments. “Environment,” while certainly a milieu for the facilitation of elements in action therein, is nevertheless a top-down way of thinking about social forms. Environments are determinants and causes, though perhaps not linear or direct ones. They are, still, somehow initiators. Spheres are more “atmospheric-symbolic places.” They are like “air” or even “air-conditioning systems in whose construction and calibration, for those living in real coexistence . . . is out of the question not to participate” (46). “Living in spheres” is indeed a condition, a structure but one which is dynamic and ethereal. It “means inhabiting a shared *subtlety*” (46, emphasis added).

*Bubbles*, the first volume of the project, is a “theory of the shared inside” (542). The bubble is the first step, the most elemental, the smallest unit of sphere. The question, of course, is what kind of bubble are we talking about here? In describing it, Sloterdijk references a variety of illustrations, including vaginas, wombs and soap. Stranger still is Sloterdijk’s embrace of the term “soul,” not the Cartesian variety but the Platonic one. Spheres are a form of “soul expansion” that would have previously been associated with “spirit,” although Sloterdijk claims that what was “meant was always inspired spatial communities” (19). But today, there is no thinking about spatial communities without thinking of networks, which has triggered “a general space crisis,” or what Paul Virilio calls “the annihilation of space.” This complicates, in particular, age-old ideas about subjectivity.

According to Sloterdijk, the annihilation of space finally reveals the myth of individual autonomy, which he describes as the “basic neurosis of Western culture,” that is, “to dream of a subject that watches, names and owns everything, without letting anything contain, appoint or own it, not even if the discreetest God offered himself as an observer, container and client” (86). The Enlightenment emphasized and augmented loneliness as the default setting of the human being. This is the case not only with the ancients but also with Hegel and Heidegger in particular. To the contrary, for

Sloterdijk, there is, what we can call, a *primary* “intimacy” between beings. Even phenomenological conceptions of “intersubjectivity” took as its quantum the individual, perceiving subject—a point made loud and clear most acutely by post-structuralist critics. But more to the point, the Modern Age too easily discarded the primacy of, what Sloterdijk describes as a magological and erotological tendency. He writes:

Among humans, fascination is the rule and disenchantment the exception. As desiring and imitating begins, humans constantly experience that they not only hold a lonely potential for desiring the other within themselves, but also that they manage, in an opaque and non-trivial manner, to infect the objects of their desire with their own longing for them; at the same time, individuals imitate the other’s longing for a third element as if under some infectious compulsion... Where philosophy of the early Modern Age mentions such effects of resonance and infection, it spontaneously draws on the vocabulary of *magological* traditions. As easy as antiquity, it was reflection on affective causalities of the magical type that initiated the clarification of the interpersonal or inter demonic concert, which, from Plato’s time on, was interpreted as a work of eros. (208)

Tracing this genealogy magological of relation from the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age allows for Sloterdijk to contrast the spheres’ model of relationality to that of subjectivity, which he, after Lacan, refers to as the psychoanalytic model. In large part, he does this to tie it to Judeo-Christian understandings of The Law, which “does not encourage merging, but constantly makes the case for constructive separations; its focus is not intimate fusion, but rather the discretion of the subject in relation to the other” (217). The Law model of subjectivity, we can argue, is the basis for so many of the recent theories of the subject that are no doubt derivative of Lacan and Althusser. In the Althusserian version, which I think Sloterdijk has in mind although he more explicitly takes aim at Lacan, the subject is the subject of ideology, constituted in and through the ISAs (Ideological State Apparatuses) that have surrounded the subject’s entire identity through various layers of institutional identity formation and recognition. Thus, when the police officer hails you, the subject was always already interpellated, as evidenced by the subject’s assumption that it is *he* that office is addressing. Put in juxtaposition to Sloterdijk, this model seems to be top-down in that there is no theory of “bindability” beyond the superstructural notion of “ideology.” This amounts to sacrificing the “relationships between things” for “being-in-itself” (220). Put differently, Sloterdijk identifies in this model of subjectivity an *overemphasis* on the ontic.

The question of the ontic most certainly leads to questions around notions of thinghood and objects. Especially nowadays, there has been a flurry of philosophical interest in ideas of object-oriented ontology. “Things” or objects are a subject of serious

theoretical inquiry. Sloterdijk, hardly a source for many of the thinkers associated with OOO and speculative realism, nevertheless shares these analytic concerns.<sup>3</sup> Subjectivity is but one rather convenient level for him to begin. It is a point of entry, not his primary intellectual concern. Nevertheless, the importance of relationality brings Sloterdijk to theorize objects, those very entities whose relations he expresses such profound interest in. In large part, he uses the term “nobject” from Thomas Macho, a German cultural theorist whose work has not quite reached the English-speaking theory world quite yet.<sup>4</sup> In Sloterdijk’s rendering, nobjects are “things, media or persons that fulfill the function of the living genius or intimate augmenter for subjects” (467). They are “objects that...are not objects because they have no subject-like counterpart” (294). His examples of “nobjects” include air as well as placental blood. Air, he writes, “possesses unmistakable nobject properties as it affords the incipient subject a first chance at self-activity in respiratory autonomy, but without ever appearing as a thing with which to have a relationship” (295). Placental blood is one of the many images of the gynecological register that Sloterdijk draws from throughout the work. The womb is of particular importance to Sloterdijk as it functions to counter the assumed importance of “primary narcissism” (320). Instead, he says that there is a primary duality, which is born out not only in art (a privileged area of evidence for Sloterdijk) but also in mythology.

This leads him to venture into some rather odd places. For instance, in a chapter on what he calls “the primal companion,” he spends a lot of space on what he calls the “sanitization of afterbirth.” There, he argues that the importance of afterbirth which subsequently suffered from a “bourgeois-individualist” attempt to retroactively isolate the subject. He even goes so far as to offer a periodization. He notes that “modern individualism could only enter its intense phase in the second half of the eighteenth century, when the general clinical and cultural excommunication of the placenta began” (384). Thus the “lonely modern subject” is a “fission product from the informal separation of birth and afterbirth. Its positively willful being is tainted by a fault to which it will never admit: that it rests on the elimination of its most

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<sup>3</sup> There are many books and other writings, mostly on the World Wide Web, on object-oriented ontology. The best definition of OOO has come from videogame theorist Ian Bogost. That can be found at: Bogost, Ian. “What Is Object-Oriented Ontology?” IAN BOGOST - VIDEOGAME THEORY, CRITICISM, DESIGN 8 Dec. 2009. Web. 26 Sept. 2012. Of the books, the following anthologies provide suitable introductions. Bryant, Levi, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman. *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*. re.press, 2011. Harman, Graham. *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures*. O Books, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> There seems to be almost nothing of Macho’s translated into English. He does, however, have a web site. <http://www.culture.hu-berlin.de/tm/>

intimate pre-object” (386). Hence, the Modern Age can be thought of as defined by “placental nihilism.”

Undoubtedly this is stylization taken to the *n*th degree. But there is something to Sloterdijk’s overuse of the metaphor. He views the maternal relationship as the prototype for his theory of relationality in spheres—“proto-subjectivity.” “[I]ntimacy is a transmission relationship . . . not taken from the symmetrical alliance between twins or like-minded parties, where each mirrors the other, but from the irresolvable asymmetrical communion between the maternal voice and the fetal ear” (511). While one could not blame any reader for being fed up with Sloterdijk’s “illustrative” method, there is, in my mind at least, a method, that is, a clear intention on the part of Sloterdijk. The imagistic aspect of his illustrative method is born out in not only the dearth of examples that he uses, but in the countless photographs and illustrations that Sloterdijk includes in *Bubbles*.

But returning to the issue of spheres and proto-subjectivity, Sloterdijk does not necessarily spend all of his efforts in a nostalgic explication for a time where ontological thinking was not devoid of magolological or erotological elements. Instead, he suggests that “modern mass culture” already exhibits this sort of reality of spheres as it “offers new, direct ways of fulfilling the desire for homeostatic communion.” He goes on to argue that “pop music and its derivatives” allow for the “possibility of diving into a body of rhythmic noise in which critical ego functions become temporarily dispensable” (527). These sorts of communions share in common with religious communions the opportunity for “absorption,” as he calls it. The most telling of examples he provides is that of the Love Parade, held in Berlin for a long time but later moved to other cities in Germany. Up until its recent cancellation, the Love Parade was characterized by its particularly EDM (electronic dance music)-heavy focus, exhibitionist ethos, and the sheer number of attendees with figures (though disputed) reported to be in the hundreds of thousands. Of this festival, Sloterdijk writes:

...[T]hey could easily be called “Truth Parades,” as their aim is to absorb large numbers of people, all of whom value the attributes of their individuality, into happy, symbiotic reversible and thus “true” sonospheres. These communions with the audio gods or the rhythmic juggernauts are based on the same truth model as post-Freudian psychoanalysis—with the difference that the latter recommends that its clients develop a strict individual rhetoric of mourning for the lost primal object, while integristic music therapy in the streets relies on drug-assisted group euphorias that may advance flirtation with absorption into a spheric primal body in the short term, but yield little profit for the participants’ media competence in the sobering periods that follow (527–528).

It is in this unlikely example of the Love Parade, where I believe the key to Sloterdijk’s

“theory of the shared inside” lies. By viewing this music festival as “communion,” and thus employing a religious register, Sloterdijk arguably betrays, what I view to be, his true intellectual concerns—theology. In showing that “life is always a life-in-the-midst-of-lives, Being-in, then, should be conceived as the togetherness of something with something in something” (542), Sloterdijk ends up using the theological concept of “perichoresis,” which the Protestant German theologian Jürgen Moltmann in his *God in Creation* describes as “the principle of mutual interpenetration.”

In Moltmann’s theology, all relationships “are analogous to God.” This is characterized by a “primal, reciprocal indwelling and mutual interpenetration,” which in theological terms is called *perichoresis*: “God *in* the world and the world *in* God; heaven and earth *in* the kingdom of God, pervaded by his glory.” This mutual interpenetration disabuses the notion of a solitary life. Against a panpsychic Leibnizian monadology, which sees ontologically individual beings that coordinate with another through a divine pre-established harmony, Moltmann describes the principle of mutual interpenetration as all living things “[living] in another and with one another, from one another and for one another” (Moltmann 17). This is analogous to Sloterdijk’s “onto-theology.”

Yet, no matter how novel Sloterdijk’s overall argument, and mode of argument, in the end, it is rather familiar because it is, even according to him, a *corrective*. *Bubbles*, and the *Spheres* trilogy generally, is an attempt to demystify, a tact nearly identical to the theoretical methods of Rudolf Bultmann but also—surprisingly—the Frankfurt school, especially Adorno and Horkheimer. To demythologize is to suggest that if we simply understood the proper genealogy of a particular concept at the root of contemporary metaphysics, it would make for a better world. For Sloterdijk, it is “sphere,” whereas for the Frankfurt School, it was “mass culture.” For all of their public back-and-forths regarding the German welfare state, it seems that Sloterdijk and Honneth, the current director of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, have more in common than previously imagined.

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