

CARL RASCHKE  
University of Denver

## PETER SLOTERDIJK AS “FIRST PHILOSOPHER” OF GLOBALIZATION

### *Sloterdijk’s Method*

German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, though writing and publishing for three decades, has only slowly gained traction in the English-speaking world for a variety of reasons. However, his time may finally have arrived. Sloterdijk, whose more recent work stands out as the more thematically precise supplement to what Deleuze and Guattari sketched out somewhat fantastically during the 1970s in *A Thousand Plateaus*, may be considered the first authentic *philosopher of globalization*. But before we venture into what his thought portends for the emergent field of globalization theory, it is necessary to review the factors behind why his ideas are only now starting to acquire an audience outside Germany, and especially in America, where he is considered the country’s leading public thinker and one of the top ten most important intellectuals by *Foreign Policy* magazine.

The first is of course the most obvious – lack of available translations. European philosophers only perform well on the Anglo-American stage when there is an accumulating array of texts that make their ideas accessible in English, which has become the *lingua franca* of scholarship around the world. However, translation is a secondary cost of publication, is labor intensive as well as relatively expensive, and frequently requires a certain kind deeply invested, “filial” relationship between the author and the translator. The early works of Derrida would not have been translated without the efforts of Gayatri Spivak, or the seminars of Lacan without the dedication Jacques Alain-Miller. Translation projects can also be a useful form of national public relations. We now know that the New York school of abstract expressionism vaulted to international fame in the 1950s because its reputation was largely subsidized and promoted – covertly – by the CIA in order to propagandize a Europe devastated by war and always in danger of siding with the Soviets on key strategic issues with the message that America was not the cultural backwater it had long perceived to be.<sup>1</sup> If it were not for the huge participation of France’s Ministry of Culture

---

<sup>1</sup> See Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 2001).

and Communication over the years in fostering translation of the major works of the country’s academics and intellectuals, the tremendous impact of French philosophy over the years would have been reduced to a raindrop in the sand. Germany’s public cultural agencies, much less endowed anyway and strategically self-effacing because of the nation’s shame about its own prominence and identity in the aftermath of the Second World War, have tended only to support established university academics, who are increasingly a sclerotic breed in a land where Kant, Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger once flourished. Though holding regular teaching positions, Sloterdijk was not for a long time a distinguished chair-holder, and he only gained his fame slowly as a “public intellectual” with a tremendous media presence, particularly after unification. Unlike a figure such as Derrida, whom he admired, Sloterdijk never really took the trouble to learn or speak English at a level where he could be understood other than in his own native habit.

The second reason is more pop-cultural than consequential. The Anglophone intelligentsia is only captivated by a foreign figure when they can isolate from their thoughts and ideas some kind of catchy, trendy, and provocative meaning-meme, or *concept-byte*. Thus Derrida quickly soared to celebrity on the power, fascination, and thoroughgoing ambiguity of the word “deconstruction,” which even the vast majority of Derrida “experts” today do not really understand. Deleuze’s reception, while extraordinary in France early on, only started to manifest significantly in America after 9/11 and with the death of Derrida. America especially was looking for a new French *célébrité intellectuelle*, furthermore; Deleuze only travelled to the United States once and did not learn English.

The third, however, is far more intricate as well as subtle. It is a question of both method and style. Sloterdijk has never been simple to pin down as to how he is really deploying both barrels of the shotgun of philosophical “investigation” itself. His style varies considerably from his major “encyclopedic” works such as the three-volume *Sphären*, or *Spheres* (only one volume of which has been translated), in which he sometimes comes across as an ingenious combination of Dilthey, Nietzsche, Husserl, and even Freud to his more timely and easily readable books such as *Terror from the Air*, where he seems like a kind of clinical writer with a scholarly bent, a Dr. Oz with an historicist sensibility befitting the *History Channel*. The philosophers we tend to lionize and admire never really had to communicate with a mass public, and if they did – as Derrida often attempted to do – they can only pull it off if they maintain an air of hermetic inviolability and impenetrability, which Derrida the self-promoter actually did quite well. Sloterdijk is the first “real” philosopher to do so, especially when he had a German television show, but the language barrier is often insurmountable.

In addition, Sloterdijk’s method, when apparent, amounts to the sort of rhetorically rich blend of incisive criticism and steely diagnostics that makes Nietzsche entrancing to read, even today when the target of so many of his observational asides are long outdated. But Sloterdijk is not merely Nietzsche cloned and reconstituted in postmodern *couture*.

Sloterdijk’s broader method, again when it comes to the fore in works such as *Spheres*, could be described as strangely “phenomenological” in very much the sense especially it has developed in the work of figures such as Marion and Nancy. For instance, in his brief, recently translated, and dense little book titled in English *The Art of Philosophy*, Sloterdijk leverages the Husserl of the *Logical Investigations* to propound a thesis that will not sit well with the university-based philosophical establishment, but justifies in a sophisticated way the underlying trend that was been long underway in the humanities as a whole: the “interdisciplinary” triumph of theory. *Philosophy is theory*, Sloterdijk maintains, but what it makes it truly philosophical rather than methodologically eclectic is that it treads the stony path of the Husserlian *epoché* in a manner that threads its way between pure contemplation and everyday lived experience. The former is of course the heritage of the Greek academy, and to a lesser extent of German philosophy up through the nineteenth century. The latter signifies the somewhat chequered, rough-cut, and often conceptually impoverished legacy of American pragmatism.

On the latter score, we need to point out that Sloterdijk is utterly ruthless – and rightly so – in his condemnation of a certain form of “pragmatism”, the twentieth century pathology of what he terms “commitment” philosophy, the subordination of skeptical distance to the ecstasies of intellectual involvement in social and political causes, the state of what in the Sartrean sense we call becoming *engagé*. Commitment philosophy is associated with what he terms the “existentialization” of philosophy which even Husserl sought in a limited way, but took a somewhat tragic turn in the career of his prize student Heidegger when he joined the Nazi party. On the left, however, commitment philosophy has remained an ongoing fashion all the way from Lukács to Badiou, claiming with the words of Marx in mind that philosophy must come down from heaven to earth become a kind of “theory” that is always validated by its proper political outcomes, a moral vision of social transformation that remains apodictic and unassailable even if the real result is tens of millions of lives sacrificed on the altar of history. Commitment philosophy always seduces the intellectual, as Julien Benda recognized in the 1920s, because it offers a heady consolation, a philosophical “sugar high” so to speak, that assuages with a short-term gratification, albeit a long-term addiction, the ivory tower dweller’s secret guilt about what he does, while inciting in him a general mania that mirrors in a risk-free manner the thrill-packed narrative of the daily world affordable to him in the mass media. Even though the philosopher may apologize for totalitarian ideologies, he never has to get his hands bloody in executing them. Thus commitment philosophy is tantamount to a philosophy without real commitment, a grand hypocrisy of the already defective moral imagination.

But Sloterdijk’s “theory” comes down to a radical philosophical exercise (*Übung*) which, going where even Husserl feared to go, functions to situate thought as genuine noetics while remaining present and engaged *in media res*. If the Husserlian *epoché*, as opposed to its predecessors within the skeptical tradition, aims to set aside the “natural attitude” of naïve impressions and inferences while letting the true, sustainable “idea” of a thing disclose itself

as part of the indispensably corrective and variable play of experiences, theory in accordance with Sloterdijk’s program of cognitive “purification” constitutes “an exercise in de-existentialization, an attempt at the art of suspending participation in life in the midst of life. Only through this narrow door could thought enter a sphere of pure observation in which the things of life cease to affect us directly.”<sup>2</sup>

But Sloterdijk’s unique kind of “phenomenological” *epoché* is not “scientific” in the modern sense of the term. In the original German version of *The Art of Philosophy*, Sloterdijk spins the bivalent German word *Wissenschaft* to tease out its classical connotation of “wisdom” rather than science. At the same time, he is not setting classicism against modernism, of Aristotelian *theoria* against empirical inquiry. Echoing Gustav Klimt’s famous declaration at the beginning of the last century about the role of art in conjunction with the esthetics of both public space and private vision, Sloterdijk tells us that authentic philosophical theorizing is deeply “ethical” and “secessionist to some extent, because it is based on the decision to leave behind the probable that unites the majority of people in order to resettle in the realm of the improbable.”<sup>3</sup> This approach to philosophy not only confounds the consensus of standard average academic discourse, which locates its mission in the conjuration of some kind of esoteric core of public knowledge designed to radiate gradually out to the periphery, it also opens both philosophy and theory to the singularity of what we would otherwise valorize – theoretically – as the religious. Sloterdijk writes extensively about religion, although he does not do so either systemically or topically. The reality of religion is always the background venue – what phenomenologists would dub the “pre-theoretical” – to what Sloterdijk foregrounds as his overarching theoretical purpose, a sort of post-Heideggerian *Gelassenheit* through which the riddle of our suddenly de-localized (and what he routinely and uncritically described as “globalized”) world environment can now begin to articulate itself as the voice of a brave new trans-European cosmopolitan rationality.

### *A Phenomenology of Globalization?*

In order to understand how Sloterdijk proceeds in this manner, nevertheless, we need to contrast his carefully crafted methodology with two quite differing errant gestures that have captured the attention of the academy somewhat recently. The first, and comparable minor gesture, is that of Jean-Luc Nancy, best known for his idiosyncratic redirection within the idiom of French phenomenology of Heidegger’s original project right after the First World War and throughout the 1920s. In *The Creation of the World, or Globalization* Nancy sketches what might charitably be described as a sort of disjointed Derridean-Heideggerian meditation on Marx’s theory of alienated labor, surplus value, and the expropriation of the labor value that is already expropriated by the advance of “capitalism” in a post-Communist world setting. There is something of a the strange, evanescent specter of materialist

---

<sup>2</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as Practice*, trans. Karen Margolis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 18.

<sup>3</sup> *The Art of Philosophy*, 80.

dialectics in what Nancy seems to be saying – a dialectics that in the familiar Marxian idiom is no longer plausible as such, yet creeps back in his characterization “world-creation” as “reopening each possible struggle for a world, that is, “for what must form the contrary of a global injustice against the background of general equivalence.”<sup>4</sup>

“General equivalence,” of course, here is Marx’s famous term, leveraged by later theorists, occurring in *Capital*. It derives from Marx’s analysis, breaking with previous political economy, of the commodity form of value as opposed to the labor-form. The distinction serves in many respects as the fulcrum of Marx’s entire notion of capital, which in popular socialist thinking even today has been functionally ontologized to the point of demonization, precisely because of the moral implications of such a theoretical *differendum*. The general equivalent is the measure of how the signifying relations of *exchange value*, which furnish the framework for separating the substance of labor - or production - value from its commodity transform, can be equilibrated in a broader market setting. In a national economy the equivalent amounts to the currency, or the backing of the currency. In a globalized economy it constitutes the system of shifting parities on the Forex market of currency exchange. Marx himself in his theoretization of the meaning and historical role of class, including the revolutionary agency of the proletariat, relied heavily on this model. The dialectical reversals of history were driven by determinable transmutations of these signifying relations.

Nancy, to be sure, is not engaging in Marxian materialist dialectics per se. But what he terms the “struggle” against global “injustice” can be traced directly to what he considers the sort of “worlding of the world”, as we might phrase it in Heidegger-speak, that commodification and the strange case of labor in the globo-digital age seems to bring about. Both justice and injustice derive, as they do in Marx, from functional economy systems that become gradually dysfunctional through their own dynamics - a dynamics of worlding. If Marx from his nineteenth century vantage point recognized that “alienated labor” as a transform of production value into its dialectical opposite held the key to eventual revolution because the system of world-constituting relationships (in the Heideggerian sense of the *zuhanden*) previously instantiated in the handicraft economy no longer mirrored themselves in the actual “relations of production”, Nancy wants to argue at the outset of the twenty-first century that the same kind of disruption as in the early industrial era is now occurring. Taking liberties with Marx and his familiar economic determinism, Nancy makes the bold claim that would-be transformations of value are ultimately transformations in the “evaluation of value.” And it is in this *revaluation* of the evaluation of value that we can begin to grasp what globalization truly means, for Nancy, and what are the conditions for plausibly revisiting the Marxian vision of revolutionary transformation.

---

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 54.

The Marxist template for critique, as we have come to discover, no longer works because it is itself founded on the transitional world-siting of its time when hand fabrication and labor autonomy was melting away before the juggernaut of mass machine production and the mobilization of labor as a standing reserve for industry. We now find ourselves, of course, in the "post-industrial" age, the age of a globalization no longer as the expansion of world markets for surplus industrial goods but as the interplay and interpenetration of cultural and symbolic complexes wrought through explosive innovations in digital communications. Moreover, as countless books and essays on the post-industrial economy have emphasized, the accumulation and "surplus" of capital consists less in its capacity for the regimentation of productive resources, but in the furthering of meaning and motivation. Nancy, with a nod to Heidegger, simply defines "world" as the "totality of meaning." Thus a reconstitution of the "evaluation of value" in today's world would have to amount to what we might term the very "capitalization" of this process of revaluation, a phenomenon we can see in the invention of esoteric and opaque "special investment instruments" such as derivatives that have contributed to the rise and fall of the new financialized global economy.

It is in this context that Nancy foresees, curiously and quite convolutedly, a "revolution" in something of an authentic Marxian manner. The past dangers of the over-accumulation of capital as expropriated labor value are replaced by the prospect that the infinite extension of symbolic proliferation (comparable perhaps to Baudrillard's "precession" of simulacra) that is tantamount to Hegel's "bad infinity." It is not labor that turns out to have been expropriated by "meaning." What we would call globalization through the dissemination of pure signs offers an opportunity - and a revolutionary one at that - to "world" a rehumanized world that is the realm of meaning-creation. "If the production of total humanity - that is, global humanity, or the production of the humanized world, is nothing other than the production of the 'sphere of freedom', a freedom that has no other exercise than 'the multimorphic production of the entire world,'" then this final production determines no genuine end, nor *telos* or *eschaton*.<sup>15</sup> Therein lies the revolutionary potential. "It is a matter of being able to take completely and seriously into account the determination of *world*, in a way that has perhaps never taken place in our history - but for which our history today would offer the possibility."<sup>16</sup> It is humanization, Nancy stresses, that can only be regarded as continual "creation" of the world *ex nihilo*. Therefore, says Nancy, "we presuppose a hypothesis with respect to an internal displacement of technology and capital that would make an inversion of signs possible: the insignificant equivalence [of capital] reversed into an egalitarian, singular, and common significance."<sup>17</sup> Nancy's vision of such a "dialectical" inversion of signs rests on many of the same premises as Marx's expectation of the imminent collapse of industrial capitalism because of over-accumulation and the immiseration of the working classes who were on the verge of coming to consciousness of

---

<sup>5</sup> Nancy, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy, 47.

<sup>7</sup> Nancy, 49.

themselves as bearers of the true sign of the universal in these condition of abject alienation. The workers of the world would have to unite, as the *Communist Manifesto* concludes in its grand flourish, because they would have nothing to lose but their "chains." Globalization thus becomes indistinguishable from the universalization of lack (misery) as the concomitant to the universalization of excess signification (capital).

Nancy's odd "phenomenological" take on the question of globalization, which interestingly he frames in terms quite recognizable to the traditions of Continental philosophy as well as Marxism, which other "theorists" on this topic tend to ignore, does establish a certain methodological point of departure quite familiar to social thinkers. The language and grandiosity of the broader vision is reminiscent in many ways of Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, perhaps the magnum opus of post-Soviet "cultural Marxism" with its preference for the "emancipation" of the symbol-making classes rather than the industrial proletariat. But one must question whether this kind of analysis is truly exhausted, and there remains something faintly comical about such supposedly "revolutionary" sentiments as "just must be rendered...to the singular absoluteness of the proper and to the absolute impropriety of the community of existents."<sup>8</sup> The Heideggerian *Ereignnis* cannot encapsulate the force of social and economic history, and it is truly doubtful whether the Marxian dialectic - almost a family heirloom for the European and American intelligentsia in the last half century - can really deal any longer on its own terms with the transformations we have been witnessing since 1989.

Perhaps the last serious – and we should add rather pretentious – claim to unravel the last Marxist, Gordonian knot of globalization is Hardt and Negri's *Empire*. We will not spend much time summarizing and critiquing the argument of *Empire*, since it is so well-known in various academic cenacles. It turns out to be a far more historical and deeply "theoretical" view of globalization than Nancy's, invoking much of the same imaginative, immanentizing, socio-eschatological rhetoric that we find in *The Communist Manifesto*. But the motifs are remarkably similar. They boil down to a fascination with the power of what Hardt and Negri term "productive subjectivities" (replacing the dialectics of class struggle), which through the emancipation of labor from its strictly physical form because of the reach, ubiquity, and planetary organization of the new symbolic and communicative technologies have the same revolutionary dynamism as the general strike did a century ago. These *symbol-producing* subjectivities, according to Hardt and Negri, are as much in thrall to capital as wage-labor was in Marx's day. Conversely, their subjugation through the "disciplinary" (Foucault) regime of capital with its all-pervasive, global, tentacular apparatus of marketing, messaging, and the pseudo-therapeutic politics of satisfying consumer desires serves as the contemporary historical breeding ground for a new revolutionary movement, collective solidarity, and transformative feats. It is a matter ultimately of mobilizing the

---

<sup>8</sup> Nancy, 111.

mass (in Hardt and Negri's argot the "multitudes") of creative subjectivities and articulating them as the struggle against "empire." If we can demystify this sort dense polemics, we begin to see that the new "proletarian" revolution, which for Marx was always the marker of the maturation of the true convergent historical processes we now term globalization, is a revolution of the "knowledge workers." And the vanguard of the revolution is not the party, but the philosopher, or philosophical theorist. No longer do we venerate the ideal of the philosopher king, but the "commissar" of the humanities academy. "Knowledge has to become linguistic action" and philosophy has to become a real *appropriation of knowledge*.<sup>9</sup>

The flip side of Hardt and Negri's triumphalist "redfest" for a post-industrial apotheosis of the so-called "tenured radical" pretending to lead the long march of *compu-workers* from their corporate cubicles, joined by the legions of telecommuters and mid-level university administrative personnel, is of course the "de-colonial" assaults on everything Western, Enlightenment, Hegelian by Walter Mignolo. Mignolo theorizes globalization as its own coliseum of struggles, not as a pitting of the global diffusion of what we would term "Bohemian bourgeois" (a term borrowed from David Brooks some years ago) subjectivities in their collective fight for liberation from the ideological control of the new capitalist *imperium*, but the confrontation of "global modernity with global decolonialities."<sup>10</sup> The global future is quite the opposite of the uniting of the knowledge workers of the world. Without explicitly making the case, where he has done deferentially elsewhere, Mignolo wants to offer his "decolonial option" even for the Marxist hermeneutic that originally spawned so-called "postcolonial theory." His aim is to shatter the cognitive architecture that forever interprets the moments of both modernity and postmodernity as somehow the consummation – or even the radicalization – of the epistemic procedures of the Enlightenment.

Postmodernist "difference", if we read Mignolo for his more covert intent rather than his actual enunciation, can be viewed with a jaundiced eye as simply a hypertrophied version of the modernist system of epistemic classifications and inferential protocols that not only made empirical science possible, but also led to racial stereotyping and colonial assumptions concerning the "superiority" of certain forms of culture and knowledge. Even the Marxist reification of class and its insistence on privileging specific forms of "class consciousness" can be seen to have been cut from the same modernist cloth. Mignolo's "decolonial option", therefore, consists in the theoretization of cultural and communal identity as a path away from *total revolutionary mobilization*. The philosophy of the future will be about a de-totalizing *di-vergent assemblage* of cultural expressions on the part of those who refuse the modernist, Enlightenment option of globalization as pan-human unification under any guise. Mignolo is not an anti-modernist, nor is he simply refining the "post-postmodernist" option underneath it all. "Decoloniality" refers to a set of projects that, based on border

---

<sup>9</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 200), 404.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 88.

identification...are open to humanity at large, in the same way that Christian theology, secular liberals, and postmodern thinkers (Marxists or not) are. However, the latter do not recognize their projects emanating from an *identity*. They *identify* their project as universal."<sup>11</sup> Universality itself is de facto a colonial concept, according to Mignolo, because it lacks the "geo-historical" and "geo-philosophical" sense of regional subjectivities that transforms any putative "revolutionary" project into a *force of expressive singularities* instead of the mobilization of those singular epistemic affirmations as some kind of globalizing – and therefore totalizing – teleology.

Overall, however, both the neo-Marxist and the de-colonial trajectories (as set apart from the "post-colonial" matrix of critique and inquiry which Mignolo construes as a type of *dissident modernity* retaining its Eurocentric epistemic orientation) of globalization theory flounder not because of their respective epistemic (or counter-epistemic) commitments, but because of *their commitment to an epistemology to begin with*. Returning to Sloterdijk, we can begin to see how theory can perhaps frame the process we term globalization in a fashion that does not rely, whether tacitly or explicitly, on the kinds of epistemological assumptions that have driven not only Western philosophy and its derivative methods, but in large measure post-Western, or so-called "postcolonial", approaches as well. We have already suggested that Sloterdijk employs his own style of a postmodern phenomenological survey of the cultural terrain. However, one must not make too much out of such a comparison, since phenomenology at its inception in the mind of Husserl was supposed to be a formal or an "eidetic" science that aimed to grasp objects as pure "essences" (*Wesen*) after the fashion of geometry. Although phenomenology began with experiences of individual things within the ambit of ego-consciousness, which Husserl famously described as the "natural attitude", his methodological stroke of *epoché* or "bracketing" served to de-historicize philosophy in the most radical manner and restore its ancient Parmenidean and Platonic status as what the late nineteenth century would term a "metalogic."

For Husserl, pure "eidetic intuition" can never be concerned with "matters of fact". In many ways Husserl was simply carrying out in a German context the popular program of philosophy as a *mathesis universalis* inaugurated by Descartes and brought back with a vengeance in the early twentieth century by Russell and Whitehead as well as the Vienna Circle. It would take a Heidegger after the First World War and his return to a "fundamental ontology" to create the conditions for the kind of *Existenz*-grounded turn in the phenomenological project as a whole that would set the trajectory for its later iterations in such figures as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and of course Marion.

### *Spherology*

---

<sup>11</sup> *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 105.

One of the possible ways for properly contextualizing Sloterdijk’s own special iteration can be found in the general “mission statement” for phenomenology articulated by Husserl himself at the opening lines of his *Ideas*. “Natural cognition begins with experience and remains within experience. In the theoretical attitude which we call the “natural” <theoretical attitude> the collective horizon of possible investigation is therefore designated with one word: it is the *world*. Accordingly, the sciences of this original attitude are, in their entirety, sciences of the world; and, as long as it is the exclusively dominant <theoretical attitude,> the concepts “true being,” “actual being,” that is, real being – since everything real joins together to make up the unity of the world – “being in the world” coincide.<sup>12</sup> Nancy’s question about “world” as the a priori condition for theorizing about globalization and Husserl’s original definition, therefore, merge into Sloterdijk’s own sort of “fundamental” standpoint. Sloterdijk names his undertaking “spherology”, which positions in an even more “prior” manner than the standpoint of world as the horizon of things as they appear. *Sphären* constitutes a kind of root metaphor for the very act of signifying a horizon. Whereas horizon serves as a notion, if not the actual word, that can be traced back to Kant, as Heidegger himself suggests<sup>13</sup>, “Sphere” counts as the *pre-epistemic* correlate to any philosophy that rests on judgments of both experience and logic. If we can employ Kantian language, we can say that it is a kind of background presence to the pre-synthetic unity of sensuous intuition. That is why Sloterdijk’s “phenomenology” relies heavily on the iteration of a sort of historical symbology and of the multifarious, fleeting icons and images that populate contemporary culture, leveraging the very same strategy of *bricolage* that modern artists from Braque to Warhol made famous.

Sloterdijk lays out his sort of post-Cartesian – and in large measure his post-epistemic – “rules for the direction of the mind” in his introduction to *Spheres*. “What recent philosophers referred to as ‘being-in-the-world’ first of all, and in most cases, means being-in-spheres. If human beings are there, it is initially in spaces that have opened for them because, by inhabiting them, humans have given them form, content, extension and relative duration. As spheres are the original product of human co-existence, however...these atmospheric-symbolic places for humans are dependent on constant renewal. Spheres are air conditioning systems in whose construction and calibration, for those living in real co-existence, it is out of the question not to participate. The symbolic air condition of the shared space is the primal production of every society. Indeed – humans create their own climate;

---

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 5.

<sup>13</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1997).

not according to free choice, however, but under pre-existing, given, and handed-down conditions.”<sup>14</sup>

Sloterdijk’s use of signifiers, most of which are imagistic (e.g., “air conditioning”), to foster and forge such a curious kind of phenomenological “intuition” are legion. The “sphere” (*Sphäre*) replaces the conventional phenomenological expression “world” (*Welt*) because it has a concreteness and a mutability – though not necessarily a transience - that belongs to the order of variable description within the realm of “experience” (*Erlebnis*) on which phenomenology has always insisted. After all, in these post-deconstructive days we should understand that “experience” can no longer be considered anyway simply an epistemological construct, but something that the play of signifiers as well as what traditionally have been termed “impressions” or “sensations” has rendered almost chaotic (or in Deleuze’s sense as instants of the *chaosmos*). The constant interchange between what is “virtual” and what can be cognized somehow as “actual”, which Deleuze attributes to constitution of “things” at their most primordial level , puts to rout the eidetic reduction for which Husserl gave a baseline, historical justification in his *Cartesian Meditations*. That primordial stratum is what Deleuze has in mind with his famous metaphor of the “body without organs,” an energetics of the sign-operation that can be correlated with the neuro-psychological, *transcorporeal* field of organic signaling and sentient intention. Viewed from another angle, it is Deleuze and Guattari’s “desiring machines,” the fading and reconstituting latticework of Freudian/Lacanian *Tribe* that are forever under “deconstruction” in their momentum toward expression in language.

Sloterdijk has something of this transpersonal model in mind in his *Zorn und Seit* (“Rage and Time”), the title of which is an obvious riff on Heidegger’s early rendering of the *primordium* as *Dasein*, where temporality functions as the screen for the disclosure of Being qua Being in terms of “there-being.” There-being becomes in a sense the “rage” of being as the true *ekstasis* of being outside of oneself. “At the beginning of the first sentence of the European tradition, in the first verse of the *Iliad*, the word ‘rage’ occurs...’Of the rage of Achilles, son of Peleus, sing Goddess...’”<sup>15</sup> Specifically, “rage” (or *thymos* in Greek) precedes both the ontological and the ontic, because it is the “force” behind the manifestation of all pre-theoretical relations or thematized conceptual configurations that count somehow as the “historicity” of Being. Likewise, the history of subjectivity belongs to this ongoing system of configurations. Even the notion of “desiring” machinations would be unthematisable without a developed philosophy of the subject, something Heidegger notes in his criticism of the Cartesian watershed that gives us modern thought. As Sloterdijk comments, “it is not the human beings who have their passions, but rather it is the passions that have their human beings.” The kind of metaphysics that makes subjectivity communicable depends on

---

<sup>14</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres*, Vol. 1, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles CA: Semiotext(e), 2011), 47-8.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time*, trans. Mario Wenning (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 1.

a certain reformatting of the story of *thymos* as “divine” rage or jealousy. “Theoretical monotheism can only gain power once the philosophers seriously postulate the propositional subject as the world principle.”<sup>16</sup>

What does this sort of transpersonal innovation in philosophy have to do with the theorizing of globalization? For Sloterdijk, we cannot begin to comprehend globalization without a careful inquiry into the way in which what Heidegger would dub *Mitsein* emerges from the virtual space of “intimacy” (*Intimität*). In fact, just as Plato said all philosophy begins with “wonder”, Sloterdijk argues that all philosophy begins with an awareness of intimacy. Intimacy at the most primordial stage is not the longing for a fusion with the cosmos, the *unio mystica*, or even a convergence with a simple other, but an unthematized regard for the “neighbor.” Sloterdijk draws this insight from his reading of Heidegger, whom he seeks to read more radically than even Heidegger would be willing to admit. “Human beings, insofar as they are beings that ‘exist’, are geniuses of “neighborness” (*Nachbarschaft*). Heidegger has in his most creative period formulated that principle for us. Since ‘existents’ are there together with each other, they are held there ‘in the same sphere of openness’. They are at once available for one another and transcendent for each other, an observation, which [Heidegger] never tires of emphasizing. However, not only persons, but also things and circumstances are comprehended in this manner according to the principle of neighborness. For that reason ‘world’ signifies for us the context for the possibility of access [to others]...Rocks, which lie near to us, do not know the condition of being open (*Offensein*) for one another.”<sup>17</sup> Every moment of being-in-the-world – and therefore the moment of what we term “subjectivity,” is inescapably *dyadic*. The transpersonal and transcorporeal imperative of unrestrained and randomly directed *Trieben* metabolizes into the kind of primitive structuration, or symbolization, that in linguistics we recognize as the subject and predicate relationship and in epistemology as the subject-object distinction.

From this ground-level structuration the “imaginative” contour of the sphere is generated. Each volume of Sloterdijk’s three volumes of *Sphären* is devoted to what we might be termed a type of *meta-sphericity*: the first is the “bubble”, the second is the “globe,” the third he enigmatically names *Schäume* (“foams”). Immediately we are enjoined to ask why “foam” – a concept that implies by itself a fugitive multifariousness – would be pluralized. Sloterdijk gives us a clue in the introduction once again. He characterizes his third and consummate volume of his “spherology” as “a theory of the present age from the viewpoint that ‘life’ itself unfolds in a multifocal, multiperspectival, and heterarchical fashion. Its point of departure not consist in a metaphysical and holistic definition of life...If ‘life’ emerges unbounded in a many-dimensional, space-shaping manner, that is not only because each monad has its own environment, but even more because each one is limited by other life-forms and is situated together with countless organic singularities. Life is articulated as a

---

<sup>16</sup> *Rage and Time*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären*, Vol. 3 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), 14–5. Translation mine.

whole in simultaneous, interleaved stages; it is generated and consumed in many interlinked production spaces.”<sup>18</sup>

The “sphere”, therefore, whether we are relying on the similitude of the soap bubble or the crystalline, heavenly body of Medieval fantasy, cannot be considered in any way a mere “social construction” of the real. The sphere is not a mediating form. It is the master signifier for the organization, evolution, and angle of visualization for all modes of being, just as for Heidegger “being-in-the-world” encompasses the entirety of both spatiality and temporality as the ground of the ontological quest.<sup>19</sup> However, they also have a decided contingency and historicity. As “atmospheric-symbolic” *topoi*, or demarcated, places that are “the original product of human coexistence,” spheres “are dependent on constant renewal.”<sup>20</sup> Sloterdijk compares them to air-conditioning systems. They do not so much create the outer scaffolding for habitation as they ensure that the shared venue of ongoing human life and the system of proximate and interactive corporeal relations we know as society is habitable in itself. But, like heating and air conditioning as well as other examples of climate control, their operation depends on their mechanical design and efficiency, and they are also susceptible to extreme variations on the outside that render them ineffective. Air conditioning cannot “acclimate” its surroundings during an electrical blackout or a hurricane, or heating systems in a blizzard or violent cold snap. “Spheres are constantly disquieted by their inevitable instability: like happiness and glass, they bear the risks native to everything that shatters easily. “Spheres are temporary “shelters” in which *Da-sein* in Heidegger’s looser meaning as “being-toward” plays out the countless permutations of personal and historical destiny. “What Heidegger called being-toward-death means not so much the individual’s march into a final solitude anticipated with panic-stricken resolve; it is rather the circumstance that all individuals will one day leave the space in which they were allied with others in a current, strong relationship. That is why death ultimately concerns the survivors more than the deceased.”<sup>21</sup>

The sphere, therefore, is as much about the circulation of the “atmosphere” within its changing spatial contours and connections as it is about its symbolic structure. Ultimately, however, spheres serve as what Sloterdijk describes as “immunological” mechanisms against allowing too much of the outside enter in. With every symbolical makeup for a given sphere, there is of course something “refined” from what enters in to accommodate the social expectations as well as the immunological function of the space. What matters comes down to how this refinement takes place. An air conditioner that circulates only the

---

<sup>18</sup> *Sphären*, Vol. 3, 23-4.

<sup>19</sup> “What recent philosophers referred to as ‘being-in-the-world’ first of all, in most cases, means being-in-spheres. If human beings are *there*, it is initially in spaces that have opened for them because, by inhabiting them, humans have given them form, content, extension, and relative durations.” *Spheres*, vol. 1, 46.

<sup>20</sup> *Spheres*, vol. 1, 46.

<sup>21</sup> *Spheres*, vol. 1, 48.

purest and most comfortable of air is in many ways a redundancy. In his introduction to the first volume of *Spheres*, Sloterdijk interprets the Garden of Eden story to reinforce this point. Ontology in the most primal sense is the “untainted bi-unanimity” of the “inspirational” relationship between the Creator and those created in his image. “Adam and his companion...remain in their exclusive partnership with God for as long as they manage to allow nothing to grow inside themselves other than what was originally breathed into them...Initially, there is nothing within them but the breathed, back-and-forth double rejoicing of the pact against externality.”<sup>22</sup>

But the “pact” or original covenant is broken in the garden, of course, by acting on the temptation by the serpent to seek the knowledge of good and evil. The “disobedience” of the primal couple is, as tradition holds, the entrance of “sin” into the world, but it is also the beginning of the expansion of the sense of the world, the inward shattering of the bi-unanimity and the thrust of consciousness outwards that marks the beginning of what in a philosophical sense can truly be called “globalization.” Globalization is the “history” of this profound human discontent born of freedom to exceed the limits of the innate spherological binary and to encounter the “externality,” the *Jenseits*, while at the same time bounding it off, modifying it, “immunizing” the present realm of habitation against what remains threatening and destructive within it, and finally internalizing this *outer space* with the appropriate symbology of inner coherence and meaningfulness. Strangely, therefore, the epoch of metaphysics which Heidegger argues is the unique “destining” of Being that is now coming to an end and which Sloterdijk explores extensively, both historico-critically and “spherologically” in the second volume, becomes the bearer of the original impulse to globalization. The metaphysical mind, as Heidegger notes, is from the outset preoccupied with first principles, with the *proté ousia*, or *arché*. But the “arché fantasy” is as much symbolical as it is philosophical. The concept of *arché* derives from the word, according to Sloterdijk, for a container or box concealing a kind of “secret” – as in the “ark of the covenant”. It “discloses the most spherologically radical notion of space, of which human beings on the threshold of high culture were capable, namely, that the artificial, insulated inner world (*Innenwelt*) under certain circumstances can become the only possible surrounding world (*Umwelt*) for an inhabitant. Thus a novel project comes into the world. It is the representation of self-concealment and self-enviroring activity (*Selbstumgebung*) of a group confronted with an impossible external world. The *arché* is the autonomous, the absolute, the context-free house, the building without neighborhood. Within it is embodied in an exemplary manner the negation of the surrounding world through the act of fabrication. It provides for the surreal spatial schema of ‘autogeneuous containment’ its first technical realization; it is able to concern itself only with a technics of the imaginary.”<sup>23</sup>

### *Urbs et Orbis*

---

<sup>22</sup> *Spheres*, vol. 1, 49.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999), 251. Translation mine.

The sphereology of the metaphysical "globe," therefore, is the inaugural moment of globalization. "If one could utter with a single word the dominant motif of European thought in its metaphysical age, it would be 'globalization'. Under the sign of the geometrically completed round form, which we designate up to this day with the Greek word 'sphere', and even more so with the Latin *globus*, the affair of Occidental reason in with the entirety of the world (*Weltganzen*) both unfolds and becomes exhausted..." Globalization begins as the geometrization of the unmeasurable (*das Unermessliche*)."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the age of metaphysics is also the age of colonization, which goes back all the way to the Greeks who invented philosophy. Historically, Sloterdijk then supports Mignolo's general thesis, but for different reasons. The advent of globalization coincides geo-strategically with the age of exploration and the carrying to remote parts of the globe (from the European perspective at least) the "metaphysical" world-container in which was ensconced the Christian "secret," the *Geheimnis* which Derrida in *The Gift of Death* identifies as the secret of "European responsibility". Mignolo insists that the European secret is that of the Enlightenment with its taxonomy of reason, which divides up the world according to a hierarchy of prioritization and subordination. But Derrida is closer to what Sloterdijk is suggesting with his suggestion that the "gift of death", archetypically dramatized in Abraham's decision to reject the universality of the moral claim in order to respond to God's unfathomable call to action, amounts to a shattering of the container of the "rational" in the original sense of the *proportional*. For Derrida, the *aporia* is just as central as the syllogism to the European imagination. So far as Sloterdijk is concerned, it is this drive to strike out in the face of the immeasurable is what propels globalization in the "archaic" context, both as a movement beyond the boundaries, such as sailing past the pillars of Hercules, and in *rounding off* and enclosing global spatiality as the sphere for the thorough "evangelization" of the self-contained, metaphysicized *urbs et orbis* we know first as the Stoic cosmopolis and later as Christendom. Deconstruction belongs as much to the Enlightenment as the Enlightenment itself, the seedbed of the metaphysico-colonial, globalizing urge. If the world was ever conceived as flat in the minds of the masses, it was always a globe in the vision of the philosophers.

However, the process of what we might dub *second stage globalization* - if we can coin an expression for the conjectural historical period on Sloterdijk's model following the collapse of the Neolithic agrarian mode of organization and the rise of militant city-states, culminating in the European colonial era - has its built-in agents of self-destruction. The key to colonial expansion naturally is the emergence of the European nation-state with its military might, administrative genius, "civilizing mission," and social welfare apparatus for maintaining the happiness of its toiling multitudes. Nationalism breeds identitarianism, at first the preoccupation with national ethno-cultural solidarity (as we saw in the nineteenth century, reaching its odious climax in the racial mysticism and the amoral as Deleuze would call it, "war machine", of German national socialism) and, secondly, in the diffuse anti-

---

<sup>24</sup> *Sphären*, vol. 2, 47.

nationalism of peacetime “multicultural” sentimentality. “The crisis of form (*Formkrise*) of modern mass society...proceeds therefore from the progressive erosion of the container-function. What until now was both understood and misunderstood, was in fact for the most part nothing but the content of a strong-walled, territorial, symbol-fortified, largely monolingual container, hence a collectivity that found its self-certainty in a certain national hermeticism and brandishes it...in its own redundancy.”<sup>25</sup>

It is this crisis of form that truly configures, for Sloterdijk, the present era, what we ourselves will name “third stage” globalization. Third-stage globalization is when the particularities of the self-contained national collectivity disperse into evanescent singularities, Sloterdijk’s *Schäume*. Sociologically speaking, it is the age of neo-liberal global consumerism. But behind this consumerism lurks a profound pathology that Sloterdijk diagnosed long before the financial collapse of 2008 and the bursting of the neo-liberal bubble of felicitous, global, market integration. The age of “foam” amounts to what Sloterdijk baptizes the “micrological turn.” Everything becomes miniaturized and internalized *in extremis*. Indeed, the force of the micrological is centripetal, as we are witnessing both culturally and economically nowadays. Using a compelling pun that can only be truly appreciated in German, Sloterdijk proposes that globalization theory in the era of evanescing foam amounts to *Schaumdeutung* (after Freud’s famous *Traumdeutung*, or the *Interpretation of Dreams*). *Schaum* and *Traum* belong to the same kind of “spherology.” Reading or interpreting the dream consists in the same kind of *hermetic-hermeneutic* of the private, pseudo-cultural, “narcissistic” symbol-world that no longer has any residue of the structured *Zusammenleben* that made politics, society, and even religion possible. It serves as the heuristic instrument for denying the reality of the *globus* as legitimate metaphor in its all-encompassing totality. Freud becomes a kind of “anti-globalization theorist”, so to speak, as the “Galileo of the inner world of facticities.” Indeed, “Freud’s early decision, to designate the dream as the royal road to the unconscious, disclosed his ‘revolutionary’ shift in emphasis from the central to the peripheral.”<sup>26</sup>

But it is this peripherality of the dream – or perhaps a better reading would be the fugitive nature of a foam-like inner space – and the transition from ego-structure to what in modern literature we term “stream of consciousness” that somehow defines the sphericity of the neo-global, the so-called “postmodern.” The dissolution of the geometrically delineated globe into frothy, de-centered, and wavelike surgings of micro-eventualities corresponds to the gradual loss of an economy of need and scarcity and one of effortless self-gratification, which actually undermines any consciousness of a self. The German term Sloterdijk picks out for this mode of dwelling is *Verwöhnung*, which can alternately, be translated as “pampering,” “spoiling”, “overnurturing,” or “indulgence” but stems etymologically from the word *Wohnung* for habitation. *Verwöhnung* is but a decadent condition of *Wohnung*, not a

---

<sup>25</sup>. *Sphären*, vol. 2, 88.

<sup>26</sup> *Sphären*, vol. 3, 33.

psychopathology per se, but *a disease of habitation*. The appending of the prefix *ver-* in German often implies a process that has gone awry, something that is misdirected or misapplied. *Verwöhnung* is also closely associated with the transformation of the sex drive from its historical role as the engine of propagation to one of pleasure-seeking and the play of desire without aim, mere inclinations minus any inherent teleology. Metaphorically or “metaspherically” speaking, we can say that Hardt and Negri’s “empire” of consumer capitalism is tantamount to one of “immanent desire.” In the section of volume 3 entitled “Empire – or the comfort hothouse” Sloterdijk identifies this new sphericity with “affluence” in John Kenneth Galbraith’s sense of the endless, co-mingling flows of goods, services, and wants. “The socio-technical core of the modern consists in the explicit prostheticization of ‘mother services’ (*Mutterleistungen*)... The state...or the politics of pampering (*Verwöhnung*) - ever since its transformation into the social services and supervisory agency functions as a “metaprosthesis”, generating concrete “mother-prosthetic” structures such as the helping professions, pedagogues, therapists, and countless organization along with the means for the fulfillment of their tasks.”<sup>27</sup>

Such a *Verwöhnung-Politik* becomes the basis for the redefinition of political “right” as filling constantly invented and recalibrated needs and entitlement. What was previously invisible to the socio-juridical elucidation of human well-being as well as the canvas of broad political expectations now begins to surface and populate itself in vast profusion, both propelled and animated by the engines of consumer messaging – including the language of permanent political campaigning – and marketing. “Infinite justice, that is, interminable [*Verwöhnung*], signifies the never finished task of freeing the manifestly impoverished and pauperized from their precarious situation and of opening up access for them to the fullness of the world, a process that cannot be formulated without paradox.”<sup>28</sup> Such a development, moreover, alters completely the “ethical intuition” of a society and consequently their sense of spatial habitation. It becomes “justice without generosity” which fosters *ressentiment* even more deeply than Nietzsche imagined. This “proliferation” of [*Verwöhnung*] means, therefore, a “freedom” in the form of an egoism that is forever “able to affirm the egoism of others” without any awareness of an emerging self-construct or personal integrity. The postmodern “foam-house” or *froth-world* obliterates the sphericity of both the metaphysical world-sphere and the binary of the primal intimate relationship, since intimacy itself is now impossible. An easy and commoditized type of narcissism reigns. The world is again “flat,” not in the way a Thomas Friedman in his infamous metaphor concerning globalization intended it, but in the divergent sense of contentless and insipid.

Sloterdijk’s third “sphere”, the realm of *Schäume*, is really a metaphor for the disappearance of the sphere-form, or the overarching structure of meaning (perhaps Lyotard’s meta-narrative has something of this flavor) in its entirety and the dissolution of life-worlds into

---

<sup>27</sup> *Sphären*, vol. 3, 802.

<sup>28</sup> *Sphären*, vol. 3, 807.

the errant flux of precise event-points, which no longer can be identified or located as attributes of the personality. Instead of the symbiosis of the pre-natal binary, which Sloterdijk analyzes in the first volume, we have the thoroughly permeable membrane of the life-world itself to its outer terrors. But these terrors no longer terrify, because they too have been absorbed into the world-foam of constantly percolating little desires, dreamlets, and flickering thought-images. There is no distinction between the experience of the latest global disaster gone viral on social media and the experience of a Bruce Willis thriller with all its digitized carnage, fire, and mayhem. It is not the era of freedom, but that of the “emancipated whim,” according to Sloterdijk. It is like being adrift in a tiny dinghy on Nietzsche’s great, landless sea but without either the sense of bold adventure or the anxiety over the loss of moorings.

In some ways Sloterdijk’s *Sphären* can be compared to Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, which has been described as a *Bildungsroman* of Absolute Spirit. It is a journey into the grand play and intra-reflection of the “gallery of images” that express the development of consciousness. But nothing is of course “taken up” in Sloterdijk’s philosophical docudrama of globalization. Everything in many ways dissolves in the end. Sloterdijk’s own version of “phenomenology,” as we have only called it half-seriously, seems no kind of final clarity or theoretical resolution. It does not allow us to comprehend, or at best even “understand”, the process of globalization. It is not theory in that sense at all. Like all good phenomenology, it allows us to “see” the phenomenon better. And even though we are aware in the end that the “image” of foam gives us more insight into the illusions and pretensions of the Western world which in its congenital consumerist narcissism and collective self-anxiety facing a new global order that is no longer kind and gentle to it, we begin to realize dimly perhaps that we have truly come to the pass that Heidegger characterized as the “end of philosophy” and of theology as well. What we have remaining is theory – and since the term *theoria* originally meant the spectacle viewed on the Greek stage, reading Sloterdijk is perhaps able to give us a mild catharsis- a catharsis of those who need a purging of feelings of fear and horror, but of what Emerson dubbed “divine discontent.” It is a discontent driven not by an encounter with the Golgotha of Absolute Spirit, but with the silence and suspended feelings of the day after.

Carl Raschke is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Denver, specializing in Continental philosophy, the philosophy of religion and the theory of religion. He is an internationally known writer and academic, who has authored numerous books and hundreds of articles on topics ranging from postmodernism to popular religion and culture to technology and society. His latest book, entitled *The Revolution in Religious Theory: Toward a Semiotics of the Event* (University of Virginia Press, 2012), looks at the ways in which major trends in Continental philosophy over the past two decades have radically altered how we understand what we call “religion” in general. His previous two books - *GloboChrist* (Baker Academic, 2008) and *The Next Reformation* (Baker Academic, 2004) - examine the most recent trends and in paths of transformations at an international level in contemporary Christianity.

© Carl Raschke

Raschke, Carl. “Peter Sloterdijk as “First Philosopher” of Globalization,” in Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory vol. 12. No. 3 (Spring 2013): 1-19.