

The Trilogy *Spheres* of Peter Sloterdijk

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I. Opening Words

I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers of this interesting International Symposium, under the auspices of major entities such as the Brazilian Academy of Philosophy/Rio and the Institute of Oriental Philosophy/Tokyo; particularly to professor Yoichi Kawada and Mr. Naoto Yoshikawa. I also would like to welcome all other Japanese colleagues who have come so far to talk with us, and all Brazilians who are attending this Symposium.

My very special thanks go to the President of the Brazilian Academy of Philosophy, Professor Ricardo Moderno, who has been a friend and also a partner for many years, if not decades, since we met in Copenhagen, in Paris, and also here in Rio de Janeiro, where he gave an important contribution to the *Tempo Brasileiro* magazine in honor of the 100th anniversary of Theodor W. Adorno, the famous theorist of the so called Frankfurt School.

I would also like to thank Mr. Wallace Moura, who worked hard to organize this important Symposium, creating the possibility to have a dialogue between the cultures and philosophies of the Eastern and the Western World.

In my particular case, I belong to this Western World, which makes me interested and open to reflect with my Japanese colleagues on the similarities and differences among modern philosophical traditions, focusing on our specific panel “A Vision of the Cosmos, Nature, and the Environment.”

II. The Focus of my Lecture

In order to develop my subject within this framework, I decided to discuss the philosophical work of a controversial German author, Peter Sloterdijk.

He became famous thanks to his book “*Critique of Cynical Reason*”

(1983), which seeks to undermine the thesis of the hegemony of reason as postulated by the Enlightenment (18th century) and certain currents of 20th century thought. Sloterdijk criticizes, *inter alia* the causes and effects of the two World Wars of the last century. In this and other studies he uses new materials and arguments, developing his own creative language and concepts.

He was criticized by some of his colleagues due to his controversial thesis developed in Elmau/Bavaria, Germany, “in favor and against” Heidegger, when he spoke of creating “*Rules for the Human Park: A Response to Heidegger’s Letter on Humanism*” (1999). In this paper, Sloterdijk discusses the possibility of genetic optimization of human beings, which would imply an interference in the essence of “human nature.”

Sloterdijk is both an admirer and follower of Freud, Nietzsche and Heidegger. In former times he had a certain sympathy for the ideas developed by the critical philosophy of the Frankfurt group, but recently he declared the death of the Critical Theory, accusing Jürgen Habermas to be the “night guard of the tombs of Adorno, Horkheimer and Benjamin.” Sloterdijk polemized with the author of the “*Theory of Communicative Action*” (1981–1983), and his defenders Reinhard Mohr (DER SPIEGEL) and Thomas Assheuer (DIE ZEIT), among other journalists.

So it is not surprising that Sloterdijk received nicknames, such as “enfant terrible,” “a German devil” (Le Monde, octobre/1999), being described by his critics as incoherent, naive, infringing borders (SZ, 6/10/1999). Among the many adjectives that were associated to his name, one of the most aggressive, came from the “entourage” of Jürgen Habermas, where he was accused of being a “right wing” author and thinker, a “genuine fascist.”

When he was asked about his new Trilogy *Spheres* (1998, 1999 and 2004), Sloterdijk characterized himself as a “romantic,” and spending some time in India among “gurus” he admitted to be a “clumsy bohemian,” “because I like wines and good drink but I work too much” (Interview with Felix Schmidt 06/10/1999).

In the same interview he claims to be a “self-taught” because he never have had a philosophy professor who served as a model. He admits that in the Trilogy, which I will discuss below, he plays the role of “midwife.” In this work, of almost three thousand pages, divided into Bubbles, Globes and Foam, his attention is focused on delivery, the birth of life, in Heideggerian terms, where the “in-die-Welt-Geworfen-Sein” (being-thrown-in-the-world) is transformed into “in-den-Weltraum-Geworfen-Sein,” i.e., the “being-thrown-in-the-cosmos.”

Thus we can turn our attention to his new focus according to which Sloterdijk blends cleverly philosophy with literature and art.

To have a better understanding of the Sloterdijk Trilogy, it is worth to look for some biographical data and shed some light on his work before the Trilogy.

Peter Sloterdijk was born in the city of Mannheim, in 1947. Nowadays he is a currently Professor and Chancellor of the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design and a Professor of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. The German television opened up a privileged space for him, where he leads with success the “Philosophical Quartet,” to which he invites authorities and stars of contemporary philosophy to engage in dialogue and debate. The program reaches a large audience.

Sloterdijk can be considered a sort of negative alter ego of Habermas, whose 80th birthday was celebrated in 2009. Sloterdijk not only question Habermas, but also the existence and validity of communicative reason. Therefore he does not believe in the pursuit of truth through dialogue processes, and is not convinced that peaceful verbal reasoning can work as a tool for combating violence and wars.

With his short essay “*Rules for the Human Park*,” published in Brazil as “*Regras para um Parque Humano*” (Editora Estação da Liberdade, S.Paulo, 2000), Sloterdijk became also known in Brazil. According to its critics and enemies, Sloterdijk is accused of defending in this essay the genetic manipulation of humans with the use of modern genetic techniques (cloning, in vitro fertilization, organ transplant, artificial selection of characteristics of future human beings) with the purpose of generating perfect human beings, as was anticipated—brilliantly—by the movie “*Gattaca*” (Dir. Andrew Niccol, 1998). Angry with such charges, some of Sloterdijk’s partisans were convinced that what he had announced in his speech were not his personal opinions but practices already underway in contemporary society, which do not hesitate to apply the results of modern research in biomedical areas to interfere in “human nature.” Sloterdijk is against Habermas’ ideas of searching—in theoretical and practical discourses—a law to regulate such practices, because he considers this a waste of time and efforts. If this was indeed the implicit message of his Elmauer speech, as stated by the author of the Trilogy afterwards, so he was trying to warn mankind of what is happening already, without the knowledge of most of the people.

Among philosophers, Sloterdijk became famous for his “*Critique of Cynical Reason*” (1983), becoming one of the biggest promises of the post-modern philosophical area, in Germany. In this work, Sloterdijk distinguishes two forms of cynicism: the “KYnismus” of classical Greek

philosophy and the “cynicism” of the tradition of contemporary thought. Cynicism is written in KY as his model (idol) Diogenes, who lived naked and used to reside in a barrel, so devoid of any need. His school of thought disapproved of social convention, public opinion and even the officially upheld moral values. For Diogenes’ followers, the “kynikos” of his time were radical opponents of the laws and conventions, seeking a return to nature. Cynicism written with Zy (in German), is the cynicism itself on its modern connotation. In this sense the concept applies to the attitudes of people who mock others and distrust the sincerity and value of reason. The word applies to people who have the habit of expressing sarcasm and skepticism regarding everything and everyone. The lack of distinction between these two conceptual connotations can lead (and leads) to misunderstandings. That is exactly what happens in the reading of “*Critique of Cynical Reason*” by Sloterdijk, which cannot always sustain the conceptual distinction he himself introduced. So at the same time that Sloterdijk is at variance with the laws and conventions of postwar Germany, he seems to mock everything he observes. With this “carnivalization” (in the sense of Bakhtin), the dimensions of seriousness and reliability in his statements and arguments are sometimes questionable.

III. A Brief Approach of the Trilogy *Spheres*

The publishing house Suhrkamp launched between 1998 and 2004 the trilogy “*Spheres*” (now translated in France and in the UK), in which Sloterdijk refers to “Bubbles” (vol. I), “Globes” (vol. II) and “Foam” (vol. III). The three volumes have received both harsh criticism and enthusiastic applause.

In his trilogy, Sloterdijk seeks to give the word “Spheres” the status of a basic concept, with topological, anthropological, immunological and semiotic aspects. His concern is to develop a “theory of modern times.”

In vol. I “Blasen” (Bubbles) Sloterdijk tries to give a description of human space, in which the dyad and not the monad (Leibniz), represents the true unity.

In vol. II: “Globe” (Globes), the author seeks to explain why metaphysics was doomed to fail due to its inner contradictions.

In vol. III “Schaum” (Foam), he defends the thesis that life unfolds in a multi-focal perspective, being neither a metaphysical nor a holistic approach, requiring the form of a “network,” something that had already been discussed by Manuel Castells in his trilogy of “Network Society.”

But for Sloterdijk “life,” the “forming of globes and spheres,” as well

as “thinking,” are the expression of one and the same reality, or, in other words, networks linked one to another. Therefore, the author of the *Sphere*—Trilogy is convinced that sociology should be suppressed and surpassed, being replaced by a “Theory of systems organized in acting networks,” captured in bubbles, globes and foam, in other words, a “Sphere Theory.”

According to the author, his three books represent an attempt to “delineate” and “listen” to the possibilities and limits of geometric vitalism” (vol. I, p.13).

Vol. I: Bubbles

In the first volume, he explains his interpretation of the concept “Sphären.” The term “sphere”, suggests that “life” and “thought” mean practically the same thing. Since the dawn of proto-philosophy of Thales, to the Platonic Academy of Athens, passing through Kant’s anti-Platonism until Heidegger and his successors, the whole of philosophy is organized into “spheres.” The thesis that runs through the three volumes says, “love stories are form stories and that every solidary relationship is a sphere formation, i.e., the creation of an inner space”. The metaphor that introduces the first volume with the subtitle “Blasen” is the “soap bubble” (analyzing the painting “Bubbles” of G. H. Every, 1887, p. 17).

In the following chapters Sloterdijk mentions Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space* in epigraphs and epistemic passages (“The intimacy of the space”), analyzing galactic spheres and “womb,” in a “free” association of ideas and images that sometimes make the reader assume that the author is under the influence of hallucinogens. Still, the language is imaginative and poetic, but although at the very limit of inter-subjective rationality. The results are amazing!

In Chapter 4 of volume I “Die Klausur in der Mutter” (The enclosure in the womb) is developing a “negative Gynecology” (pp. 275 ff.), in which he devoted himself to the study of celestial orbits through long passages, the principle of the egg (by analyzing the context of Hieronymus Bosch’s “*The Garden of Earthly Delights*,” p. 333), the function of the placenta and its use in symbolic rituals among Indians of different cultures. These considerations also led him to examine the theories of the angels, the appearance—in images of people in pre-Columbian America—the “Doppelgänger (the double)” (p. 431), and the existence of twins, because one of its basic thesis is to say that we do not live in “monads” (à la Leibniz) but in “dyads.” At the end of this volume, he pursues his criticism of Freud (begun in “*Critique of Cynical Reason*”)

and disagrees with Lacan's interpretations of Freud's writings.

Vol. II: Globes

The second volume, subtitled as "Globes" has as a prologue a fine study of a mosaic of the first century B.C. known as: "*Mosaic of the Philosophers of the Tower Annunciata*," in which seven elderly men in an idyllic setting, not far from a Greek city (Akrokorinth or Athens), are gathered around a "sphaera," a "world"—and a "divine sphere," representing the model symbol of wholeness and fullness of Parmenides and Empedocles. A podium and a box assume the functions of an altar. The Globe seems to proclaim a categorical imperative: "Come and think me!," and "fulfill yourself in me" (vol. II, p. 21 et seq.). Over the heads of the philosophers gathered hangs a sundial. Otto Brendel (1936) made the suggestion to interpret the mosaic as a "schola" (school) in which these philosophers probably met the "protophilosopher" Thales (of Miletus). The 7 gifts symbolize 7 qualities, 7 questions and 7 answers, all of them alluding to wisdom and knowledge (cf. foot note of page 7, vol. II "Kugeln," pp. 30-1). There are also several different interpretations (see Konrad Gaiser's version 1980).

In his foreword to the second volume, Sloterdijk points out that in a Park in Weimar, near Goethe's summer house, is placed a sculpture, which shows a globe (from 1777) entitled "Altar of good luck" (p. 43). At the entrance to the Rockefeller Center in New York one can observe another globe carried by Atlas (cf. image by Lawree Lee, 1937) with the same symbolic character.

In my capacity as urban sociologist, I was especially interested in chapter 3 of this volume entitled "Arks, city walls, boundaries of the universe, immunological systems" (pp. 159–197). Here Sloterdijk introduces the picture of the Cemetery of the Innocents in Paris, which no longer exists. The reproduction was made in 1550. In this context, Sloterdijk says: "When you can assign the spiritual dignity of one life-form to its clear spherical shape, in other words, the ability to gather under one horizon, people alive and dead in a communion ritual, (you can see that) small tribes are formations that deserve the same admiration that empires of millions and millions of people held in a circle of domination" (vol. II. p. 173). These are the groups which in its formation processes through generations are able to organize and generate their own psychic powers and symbolic circles of distance and proximity. If they can delineate what is familiar and what is strange, we may call this an "anthropological place." Within this circle dwells the genuinely human. In other words, this place becomes a territorial sphere of the living

world, the localities (Orte) permeated in the imaginary of the living and the dead. Sloterdijk calls “ethnosphere” the effort to create worlds of life covered by the dead and the living, beginning the era of “globosity” beyond ethnic boundaries. It is in this context that Sloterdijk refers to the “Babylon of Gilgamesh” epic song, which was broadcasted in four different languages (Ibid. p. 175). Here Sloterdijk refers to the version of the poem translated by Albert Schott, reviewed and commented by Wolfram von Soden (Stuttgart, 1958).

As in later poems and philosophical reflections that have life and death as their subject, here emerges the ground on which macro-lyrical spaces can be created such as the *Divine Comedy* of Dante or other related to the spiritual life. We can also talk about spaces outside our control or out of control.

Vol. III: Foam

In the central body of the third volume Peter Sloterdijk develops his theory of capsules, islands and greenhouses (pp. 309–490). Particularly interesting for the general subject we are debating, stands the concept of “Insulierungen” (insulations), which refers, according to the author, to the processes of islands-formation. Within this central theory, Sloterdijk discriminate three types of islands: the absolute Islands (space stations), the atmospheric Islands (Biosphere 2) and the anthropogenic Islands (human life generating). It is worthwhile to dive into each of these types to have a better understanding of their characteristics and functions and thus provide the benefits of this islands—typology.

As an example of absolute islands, the author mentions submarines and space stations that already exist and the ones that still will be created. These absolute islands differ from the geographical islands by two characteristics: they are not restricted to bi-dimensional (horizontal surfaces). Islands of the terrestrial globe are not, therefore, absolute islands, they do not move and have their territorial demarcation made by the ocean or river waters.

The most important example to Sloterdijk comes from Jules Verne’s Captain Nemo. His submarine has the characteristic of mobility (*mobilis in mobili*), an idea soon appropriated by Oswald Spengler as a metaphor to characterize the existential formula of the manager in our Faustian civilization.

“The submarine—hotel moved by electricity, Nautilus, is the result of the inventive spirit of the great misanthrope, represents a first perfect technical realization of an absolute idea of insularity—a worldwide model of total isolation and introversion (with his musical instrument,

an own organ, and his wide library) of a heated and submergible enclave in permanent runway of people and ships” (vol. III, p. 318). It is like the involuntary shipwreck of Robinson Crusoe on a desert island, which was transformed into a desired exile and the model Island was transformed into a floating grotto, crowded with the treasures of European culture, transforming Robinson into a sad sea-hermit.

Another, and more significant, example used by Sloterdijk is the spatial station, which is useful to philosophers in developing a new enlightened theory of human condition. Putting aside the romanticism of space conquest, the spacecraft reality and manned spatial station stands for three indispensable categories of a possible condition of human existence in the space (Weltraum): immanence, artificiality and upward drive (Auftrieb). The manned spatial stations are fields of anthropological demonstration that highlight the astronaut’s “being in the world.” This is only possible through “being in spatial stations” manufactured by man. The ontological specificity of this relation consists in the fact that station represents much more than a real island, it is a model of our new world, more specifically, an immanence machine, in which existence or “the possibility of permanence in the world” is on total dependence of the sophisticated technicians promoting this world. The most appropriate framework—philosophy would be Heidegger’s doctrine of “*Gestell*” (frame), in a positive reinterpretation (cf. vol. III, p. 321).

A spatial station is not a landscape or region, explains the author, because for the time being it is just a meeting place of cosmonauts with their microbes. But in the future, when the MIR station will be replaced by smaller units, NASA will be testing a kind of mini greenhouse, in which will be grown, with resource of solar energy, at 2.8 square meters, small gardens (“salad machines”) capable of producing carrots, cucumbers and salad for a crew of four people. This way, the spatial stations can be understood like being environments described by the technicians of space conquest, like systems of life conservation ECLSS (Environment Control and Life Support System).

Viewed from this angle, it will be necessary to reconsider our concept of “nature” resulting of our anthropocentric perspective. From our new point of view in which the nature is a kind of “prosthesis” for human survival, we can redefine the “nature,” originally found by man in his terrestrial environment as a “pre-configured system of human life preservation.” Only those who leave this system can learn how to regard and understand this environment from outside. Only then can a rupture be perceived between the known and customary, on the one hand, and alternative ways of new and artificial life, on the other hand.

According to Sloterdijk, this was the great contribution made by spatial research to improve the understanding and awareness of the human condition in new artificial environments. In this revolutionary view, it became easy to formulate the Island Theory, making it possible to understand the second type of islands, the atmospheric ones. The central warming systems and air conditioning are the simplest and most trivial examples. Both of them draw our attention to internal environments of houses, offices, and make it possible to surf through the modern consumption world with its commodities offered in stores and malls (shopping centers or ships). From this to greenhouses, thematic parks and botanical garden is just a step.

Here Sloterdijk pauses and describes in the next topics the emergence and cultivation of artificial greenhouses like the Cristal Palace in London (1851), Laeken Park near Brussels, built in 1875 or the Botanical Gardens in Hamburg, Hannover, Munich, Berlin and other greenhouses directed to plantation of tropical species like *Victoria Regia* in the European cold winter (cf. vol. III).

Other atmospheric Islands analyzed by Sloterdijk are the experiences with bio-sphere performed in the USA, like the mega project Arizona "Biosphere 2" in 1991, which was funded by the petroleum multimillionaire, Ed Bass. He became fascinated with the idea to expand the experience of vegetable greenhouses to projects that included human crews. Jean Baudrillard, refers to this Project in a book published by UNESCO: "*Homme, Ville, Nature*" (Toulouse, 1992). It is an experiment in isolation and inclusion, with strong esthetic characteristics, which has cost 1.5 million dollars. However, the results were not very encouraging (cf. vol. III, *ibid*, p. 355). Critics remembered that it was a huge project which mixed science fiction and true science. In a certain way we could classify the three sequences of Spielberg's science fiction movie, "Jurassic Park" (I, II, III), in this category. The Columbia University tried to correct the mistakes of the "Biosphere 2" model of 1991 ten years later, creating the "Eden Project"(2001) model. Its structure represents very well the content of the last volume of this trilogy: the appearance of "foams" (Schäume).

Finally, we reached the third type of islands, the Anthropogenic Islands. This type reminds us of Sloterdijk's essay on the "Rules for the Human Park." Here the author refers to that kind of island, aiming at what Luhmann, Varela and others have called "Autopoiesis." Sloterdijk named it "Selbstbrütung," referring to the manner of self-generating and developing life, mainly human life, in specially prepared contexts.

For the purposes of this lecture and the general discussion in this

Symposium, I will limit myself to enumerate some aspects of the “auto-poesis” of human species, as conceived by Sloterdijk. In this type of Islands the author mentions nine sub-categories, related to the pre-requisites of human life: Chirotop; Phonotop; Uterotop; Thermotop; Erotop; Ergotop; Alethotop; Thanatotop; Nomotop (teaching of law) (cf. pp. 362–500).

Let us briefly specify each of these dimensions:

- Chirotop refers to the performance of the human hand, the area of what can be achieved, the world of human action, the first and primary manipulations (bids, slaps, cuts) that produce specific results in the environment;
- Phonotop (or Logotop) is the vocal sound that encompasses an auditory space, in which those living in the community listen to each other, talk, issue commands, and inspire each other;
- Uterotop (or Hysterotop) is a conquered space that aims to expand the area of maternal protection and care. This scale produces a centripetal force that is perceived and experienced by affected (or even larger units of people) and experienced as a feeling of belonging;
- Thermotop is the integrating heat that the group experiences arising originally home fire and thanks to which the group has the sensation of coziness and “sweetness” of home life, representing the matrix of all the experiences of well-being;
- Ergotop (or Phalotop) refers to the size of a *sensus communis* caused by parental authority or a religious authority that generates a spirit of cooperation that can lead to different forms of division of labor or, in extreme cases, a willingness to participate in struggles and wars in defense of the community;
- Alethotop (or Mnemotop) characterizes a situation in which a group capable of learning is constituted as a guardian of a set of common experiences (traditions);
- Thanatotop (or Theotop or even Ikonotop) refers to a place of revelation of ancestors, the dead, the spirits and gods of the group, offering to this group a semiological connection, a gateway for manifestations of the “beyond”;

- Nomotop binds the living traditions of the group, through the division of labor and reciprocal expectations through which the mutual exchange and the hoping of cooperation make emerge a social architecture of reciprocal expectations, of opposition and resistance that lead to a political constitution. Each of these topoi is developed and extended in chapters and passages that follow, but which I will have neither time or space to develop here.

IV. Provisional Conclusions

From all that I have explained so far, we can see that the philosopher of “cynical reason” is a disciple of Nietzsche and Heidegger. In his trilogy *Spheres*, he transforms the Heideggerian concept of “In-die-Welt-Geworfen-Sein” in “being released-in-space” and the Nietzschean “heitere Wissenschaft” in a chapter on “frivolous” and “lightness” of science (in “Schäume”/foam) to get a true “theory of modern times.”

A careful reading of his work shows that he draws on authors such as Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, Niklas Luhmann, Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Hannah Arendt and many others with the ambition to provide the reconstruction of an “universal history.”

For Sloterdijk, technology, especially in the field of biological research and the achievement of the conquest of space (off the ground), represented a true shift to modernity. Modern technology throws Man in space ships and space stations, outside of the globe, creating new environments, totally artificial which are open to an unknown universe. This technology relies on the press, the telephone, the radio, the television, the Internet The question of Heidegger has changed because of this content. The Man is not simply thrown in the world, but in space, challenging new galaxies in the universe of which we know little or nothing. This new fact implodes all our knowledge of “society” and our value systems, our concepts of life, our sense of the environment and biotechnology.

In my reading of the vast work of Sloterdijk and its discussion on the “Rules for the Human Park,” the author wants to convince his readers that the discoveries relating to the human genome and that of other living beings, already underway, must be disclosed and made public, thus preventing them from being controlled and manipulated by experts, biologists and technicians, to the exclusion of the vast majority (mass) of mankind. It is urgent, therefore, to be clear as to who controls and oversees the inventors. The author warns: while we wait and discuss, the

“facts” (die Sache, das Ding) may be advancing and escaping our supervision.

In his trilogy *Spheres*, Sloterdijk uses abundant iconography, art, museology, history and literary criticism. He is deeply knowledgeable about universal literature and philosophy, and uses, superficially but in a coherent manner all kind of empirical data. He writes well but is thoroughly disorganized, often walking devious paths in order to reach a goal. In the final chapter of his trilogy which he calls “Oxymoron,” he gives the floor, skeptically and mockingly, to four presumed writers/readers of the trilogy: a historian, a literary critic, a theologian and a man of letters. Each of them values and disregards different aspects of the book, and none agrees fully with the ideas contained in three volumes of Bubbles, Globes and Foam. It is as if Sloterdijk were not responsible for the topics covered in the almost 3000 pages of these books.

He is a descendant of Hölderlin, Goethe, Nietzsche and Heidegger. As such, he is a master of the German language who knows to deconstruct and recombine fragments in an entirely new mosaic. His texts are dadaistic collages. He is a “philosophical bricoleur,” in the sense of Levi-Strauss’s “pensée sauvage.” His logic is that of dreams and free associations.

Having completed the reading of the three volumes, one gets the impression of having flown over centuries and continents. Time seems to have no limits, and space opens up to the infinity of universe. Upon reflection, the reader fears that the bubbles, globes and foam may explode, evaporate. We ask ourselves, why the author made us read and be exposed to so many heterogeneous and unsystematic materials. This question seems to be asked by the author himself in the concluding part of his trilogy. Had everything he said been a mirage, an effort without results, “much ado about nothing”? These questions lead to a final question; would this be a metaphor for most of current philosophy?

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