



## BOOK REVIEW

# THE GLOBAL SPHERE: PETER SLOTERDIJK'S THEORY OF GLOBALIZATION

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*Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals. Für eine  
Philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung,*  
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*Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals* (2005) delivers what its subtitle promises: a philosophical theory of globalization. This book and the theory it expounds extends the morphological philosophy of space put forward previously by Sloterdijk in the *Sphären*-trilogy (p. 14),<sup>1</sup> which discusses a philosophical history of what he calls terrestrial globalization. For Sloterdijk, the globe as a philosophical concept (*Globus, Kugel, sphaera*) is a result of terrestrial globalization (p. 37) – the processes of materialist expansion that produce the world system. Terrestrial globalization marks the middle stage of a three-tier process. It is the only part of “humanity” that Sloterdijk

finds worth calling “world history in a philosophical sense” (p. 28). Terrestrial globalization follows a cosmic-Uranian or morphological globalization – marked by the Greek metaphysical discovery of the globe as apparent in their love of the spheric form – and is followed by the electronic globalization, in which we are currently enmeshed. It marks a stage in the history of European (“Christian-capitalist”) colonial expansion which historians tend to pin down to around 1492 to 1945 (p. 21). In its emphasis on the intersection of philosophical and materialist processes through which the globe comes into view, the book continues a philosophical style that radically differs from continental hermeneutics, critical theory, or Deconstruction. Instead, it offers a self-proclaimed metanarrative that seeks to overcome the flaw of former metanarratives, which, Sloterdijk says, were not “meta” or global enough (p. 14). *Im Weltinnenraum* shows the earth to have gradually become an excentric globe, focusing on being-in-the-world-of-capital because economic globalization has, Sloterdijk argues, proven to be “the most effective totalization, the contraction of the earth by means of money in all its appearances” (p. 17).

In the first part of the book, Sloterdijk pays attention to what one might call three discoveries and one invention: the discoveries of space, water, risk, and the ensuing invention of the modern subject. Sloterdijk discusses how geographers and seafarers mapped this modern vision of the world. The very notion of humanity as a single species becomes possible only after Magellan, Columbus, and others of their kind. Monogeism – the emergence of the single globe – involved a number of changes. For one, the processes of terrestrial globalization produce a changed sense of locality and subjectivity. In the modern age, the earth becomes the planet to which one can return (p. 41). Not the inside, but the outside, the faraway, the “there” is what tempts (p. 175). The interior becomes a mirror of the exterior (p. 44), as becomes apparent in cabinets of curiosities and in curiosities-collections. When the interior is the mirror of the exterior world, living conditions condition knowledge conditions (p. 45). Thought thus becomes oriented toward space, faraway places, toward the unknown but knowable. It transcends traditional world spaces. Terrestrial globalization becomes apparent in its most formalized form in Jules Verne’s Phileas Fogg, whose travels around the world in eighty days (1874) mark, as Sloterdijk says, the birth of the modern tourist: Fogg travels, with blinds closed, to places he knows (from the prospectus); Fogg also knows what they look like, for the point of his travels is not education but travel itself (p. 66). The message is: the earth is round and can be rounded.

Yet the modern age also understands that the “earth” is really an incorrect name for our planet. Rather, water is discovered as the “leading element.” This discovery of water means that the conquest of the globe takes place over water, resulting in the modern shift from shoreland-thought to ocean-thought (p. 71). The maritime age

dawns, and the liquid element is homologous to the flows of global capital which stream between the Old and the New World (p. 133). Modern global capitalism starts with the maritime age. Crucial herein, says Sloterdijk, is the discovery, next to space and water, of risk. Speculation and the globe form the conditions of a world system of capitalism (p. 74). If seafaring brought with it an enormous potential for trade, this was paralleled only by the huge possibilities for speculation. The adventures on the ocean were full of potential opportunities but in austere, faraway markets (p. 75). The modern entrepreneur is thus born as a speculator on a mostly liquid globe. He becomes a debt-producer. Debt is no longer a moral deficit, but a source of economic profit. Cartography becomes an object of power; whoever owns the best image of the world, owns the world (pp. 159, 167). The main fact of the new age “is not that the earth goes round the sun, but that the money goes round the earth” (p. 79). The principle of tele-vision stems from an age in which one must of necessity look ever further, in accordance with the motto with which Charles V sailed the oceans: *plus ultra* (ever further).

The discoveries of space, water, and risk thus lead to a new form of subjectivity. Because of this new configuration of space and place that has been discovered by Magellan and others, the modern subject emerges. Sloterdijk quotes Heidegger (*Holzwege*, 1950) from *Die Zeit des Weltbildes*, who says that the essence of the modern age is the conquest of the world as a picture. This conquest through the image starts with modern cartography and ends with 21st-century mediatization. Globalization, for Sloterdijk, is a process (*Geschehen*) in which Being and Form meet in a sovereign body (p. 21). The topological message of modernity is “that people are living beings, living at the edge of an uneven round body – a body which, as a whole, is neither a mother’s body nor a container, and which has no protection to offer” (p. 54). The modern subject, aided by researchers, priests, entrepreneurs, politicians, and many others, is a rationally motivated actor (p. 92). Sloterdijk argues that this is an autopersuasive subject (p. 102), or a subject that is in constant need of ideology, and, especially from 1968 on, consultancy (pp. 91–2, 102–7). The core of modern subjectivity lies in the shift from theory to praxis (pp. 93ff.). A subject, according to Sloterdijk, is someone able to suspend inhibition for acting. In what is an obviously Foucault-informed analysis, Sloterdijk argues that subjectivity entails an internalized pressure from outside. The subject becomes constituted in the production of the authority that orders him or her (p. 93). Modern subjectivity thus hinges on the organization of the suspension of inhibition to action. The modern philosophy of the autonomous subject reifies the idea that it is the individual, which overcomes his or her inhibitions to action, yet it authorizes this by means of Reason or history, through ideology, or, as is presently the case, consultancy. This subject is an entrepreneur, a product of action-thought, of progress, of the new (p. 108).

Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov is the prototype of the innovative subject, who, through his crime, becomes an action-person (p. 117). This kind of subjectivity is the consequence and presupposition of the conquering of the world. It is the action-man that strives for total inclusion of the globe within a single imperialist/capitalist world system. Sloterdijk nonetheless argues that total inclusion is a fiction (p. 26). The Crystal Palace of global capitalism – to which we turn below – is at once an outside to another inside. In other words, from the perspective of those outside the Crystal Palace, the palace is an “outside” to other “insides.” The first to encounter the failure of the project of total inclusion were the translators of the modern world, who came across a Babel-like multitude of languages that could not be integrated into one system (p. 213). Modern imperialism is explained by the conquering of other subjects on a “dark continent” or an outside of another kind that is characterized by a lack of subjectivity and therefore of humanity (p. 176). Humanity became a project to be established worldwide. Global capitalism took resources and brought humanity. The modern discoverers were the forerunners of today's technicians of “corporate identity” (p. 129), and the “subjectivity of taking” (p. 189) became the hallmark colonization. It is characterized by risk, since every subject is a potential threat, a point of autonomous initiative, of incalculability (p. 95), and the project of humanity as global subjectification therefore remains, as Sloterdijk puts it, “no picnic” (p. 106).

The second part of the book, “the great interior,” presents a theory of the “global inner space of capital.” This theory of “the inside” is necessary as globalization repositions humankind: not by complete global inclusion, as is often claimed, but by local exclusion. Local “immunities” are created to cope with globalization. Before Sloterdijk begins with the description of the “global inside,” he pays attention to the change in human social relations. As distance disappears, or at least shrinks, everyone becomes everyone else's neighbor. Ironically, this process strengthens misanthropic tendencies and reproduces the original similarity between “neighbor” and “enemy” (p. 220). The misanthropic Glasshouse spawns terrorism. Knowing how to make use of the telerealistical situation that has been created, terrorists are experts in spreading a climate of fear. Through performances that go beyond the fantasies of Hollywood screenwriters and production studios (p. 282), they realize large consequences by means of small actions.

Most interesting in the second part is Sloterdijk's description of the new *modus vivendi* of people adapting to life between the local and the global and he offers Dostoevsky's Crystal Palace as an architectural metaphor for the current situation. Here, Sloterdijk describes the replacement of the nation state by a global comfort system that mediates between the “self” and “place.” About one third of the population lives in the Crystal Palace: people with better life chances and more purchasing power are included while the

poor “parasites” are excluded (p. 305). According to Sloterdijk, a new form of apartheid is born through apartheid by capitalization (p. 307). Once within the Crystal Palace, however, no one leaves, as everything the consumer needs is present (p. 275). Probably unexpectedly, but not surprisingly, Sloterdijk considers communist states as secondary, albeit less luxurious, building sites of the Crystal Palace (p. 276). Moreover, communist states and the Crystal Palace each have their own “rules for living.” In the “global inner space of capital,” collective certainties are replaced by groups of privately insured individuals (p. 241). Politics is banished from the palace, not political elections but the mood fluctuations of the inhabiting consumers determine what will happen (p. 268). In addition to their political choices, the inhabitants have also lost their energy source. Due to the “revaluation of all values” the crucial position of labor has been replaced by fossil energy: people are “baptized” in oil. The ontological consequences of this are as follows: the definition of freedom as the unlimited possibility of mobility; reality as a choice (it could have been different) instead of necessity and the replacement of scarcity by waste (pp. 355ff.). How long this ontological change will stand depends upon the time it takes to “replace” oil with solar energy. The consequences of the “revaluation of all values” are opaque and diffuse. Yet a number of characteristics are evident: people will, for instance, earn money without working; enjoy political security without warfare, immunity without suffering, knowledge without learning, and be famous without substantial performance (pp. 334ff.). Living in the Crystal Palace is not difficult as people live a comfortable life in solidarity. But the Crystal Palace is hard to defend. This is because, for Sloterdijk, globalization creates new borders and new immunities that put into question traditional dichotomies. In political terms: Leftist values are realized through the promotion of a Rightist programme. Solidarity and success ask for asymmetry, exclusivity, selectivity, protectionism, and irreversibility (p. 413).

For Sloterdijk, the United States (US) founds the Crystal Palace. However, the US’s perspective on world politics is founded on a kind of militarized management that guarantees the functioning of the global comfort system. Yet to survive as a country based on immigration, which implies welcoming people to the American dream, the Crystal Palace must be turned into a fortress. Of course, one can criticize the US from this standpoint, but Sloterdijk is aware that (energy) resources are necessary to keep the palace comfortable. He then leaves the reader with the question of whether Europe could emancipate itself without using military power (p. 390). This makes Sloterdijk’s book more “personal” than the *Sphären*-trilogy, and much of this is due to the essayistic style of *Im Weltinnenraum*. Here, he addresses the current situation and its antecedents, all the while reframing global geopolitical questions in terms of a philosophy of space that recognizes the necessary exclusion accompanying every inclusion. This work is thus as much a new kind of critical theory as

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it is a work of political theory, and it raises awareness of historical links such as, to name but one, that between Phileas Fogg and US President George W. Bush. Where it leaves the reader wanting is in the realm of cultural politics. Sloterdijk assumes the necessities of inclusion and exclusion, but does not explain the cultural political consequences of the borders between the inside and the outside. Thus, in conclusion, while Sloterdijk searches for ways to maintain a balance between inclusion and exclusion without waging war, he fails to avoid what might be called the “reification of spatiality.” For Sloterdijk and for us, then, questions of inclusion and exclusion, of the “inside” and the “outside,” not only remain contested but also do so on a global scale. His “eulogy of asymmetry” (pp. 406ff.) hence does not grasp more complexity than a bipolar antagonism such as Schmitt’s “friend”/“enemy” distinction.

**NOTE**

1. All references to page numbers refer to *Im Weltinneraum des Kapitals*. (All translations are these authors’ own.)