

Reviews

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Terror From the Air
by Peter Sloterdijk, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran
Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009, 12 pp. ISBN 9781584350729

Rage and Time: A Psychopolitical Investigation
by Peter Sloterdijk, trans. Mario Wenning
New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, 256 pp.
ISBN 978-0231145220

God's Zeal: The Battle of the Three Monotheisms
by Peter Sloterdijk, trans. Wieland Hoban
Cambridge and Malden MA: Polity Press, 2009, 216 pp.
ISBN 978-0745645070.

Peter Sloterdijk is one of the provocative and prodigious philosophers of the present day. Known to the stubbornly monophone Anglo-American academy only by his 1980 *Critique of Cynical Reason*, he has been steadily building an oeuvre and reputation of great reach over the last three decades. He can be thought of in some ways as a kind of German Žižek – prolific, pugnaciously opinionated, quothably contrarian, affably at ease on a public stage and perversely drawn to the defence of lost causes, but altogether less dogmatic, more historically aware, more argumentatively versatile and with a defter wit.

The clutch of translations considered here are harbingers of considerably more to come. Semiotext(e) have in the works *Neither Sun Nor Death* and *Nietzsche's Apostle*, followed, in autumn 2011, by a translation of the first volume of Sloterdijk's major work, the majestic three-volume *Sphären* (*Spheres*), published between 1998 and 2004, which reads human history – philosophical, religious, artistic, political – as the successive elaboration of different kinds of 'spheres' or world-making spaces of enclosure or introversion. Until then, strict abstainers from German will have to be content with the hundred pages of *Terror From the Air*, which originally appeared as *Luftbeben* (and why could it not have been translated as *Airquake?*), a volume that itself originally appeared in 2004 as a section of the third volume of the *Sphären* trilogy.

This volume, entitled *Schäume (Foams)*, is given over to the analysis of the 'semi-opaque foam of world-making constructions of space' that Sloterdijk calls the 'polyspherology' of the modern world.¹ Sloterdijk proposes in this volume that 'the real, foundation of modernity is not revolution, but explication [*explizieren*]. Explication is for our time the true name of becoming.'² As a result of explication, whatever has previously lain in the background, as a mere given or assumed form of existence, is brought forcibly into view, its principles unfolded, its possibilities actualised. Sloterdijk sees the most important and decisive arena of explication as occurring with respect to the atmosphere, since our relation to the air is the feature of our embodied life that is most taken for granted. The atmosphere is therefore in a sense the implicit as such. In *Terror From the Air*, Sloterdijk assigns a date to the point at which the process of explication became systematic and irreversible; 22 April 1915 marks the first use of chlorine gas in the hostilities of the First World War, by German forces against French-Canadian troops positioned near Ypres. The significance of this lay in the fact that, for the first time, the target of a weapon was not the body of an adversary, but rather his environment, which is thereby both subject to assault, and itself enlisted as an assailant. After its inaugurating moment, what Sloterdijk calls 'atmoterorism' continues to escalate after the First World War, through the industrial use of gas for extermination of insect pests, the judicial use of gas as a means of execution in the USA, the use of Zyklon B for the murder of Jews in the concentration camps, the manufacture of annihilating firestorms in Dresden, the effects of radioactivity following Hiroshima and Nagasaki, all the way through to more recent attempts to take control of the weather for military purposes.

This inaugurating act encouraged an explosion of techniques for monitoring and maintaining the quality of the air. Although these had seemingly peaceful dimensions during the rest of the century, Sloterdijk sees them as direct beneficiaries of the atmoterorism of gas war and characterises the crossing over of atmoterorism into the generalised concern for the air as an epoch of 'air conditioning'. Sloterdijk's fundamental insight is that we must learn to live in the world we have created, in which our existence can never any more be merely given, even as we can no longer imagine ourselves to be the simple dominators of our environment. As Sloterdijk puts it, 'the culture that sheds biological light on itself learns to pass from a fantasmic ethics of universal, peaceful coexistence to an ethics of the antagonistic protection of the interests of finite unities' (*Terror*, 110). This is an edgy, unstable, but honest condition, in which, as Michel Serres has recently said, 'we are dependent on things that now depend

on us'.³ To see this as a fundamental readjustment is, in the unaccustomed understatement that Sloterdijk offers us, 'not saying too little' (*Terror*, 110).

Sloterdijk is less of a philosopher than a philosophical psychohistorian. His work is characterised by an odd and distinctive blend of functionalism, often supported by reference to the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann, and a wild, almost Spenglerian sort of civilisational analysis which, in works like *Rage and Time* (2006) and *God's Zeal* (2007), can produce audaciously, even recklessly original readings of political and religious history in terms of the collective organisation of feelings.

The governing claim of *Rage and Time* (the original German title, *Zorn und Zeit*, a wry revision of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*) is that the fundamental importance of anger and associated affects of pride, indignation and aggressive self-assertion has been ignored or inaccessible in the modern world. We should reinstate, alongside the principles of eros and thanatos, the principle of thymos, which Plato characterises as the instinct for recognition or what our more thuggish kind of urban infant likes to call 'respect'. Sloterdijk reads the rage that is associated with this instinct as a drive to empty the self into pure action. The rage of Achilles that is mentioned in the first line of *The Iliad* embodies the principle that 'the inner life of the actor should become wholly manifest and wholly public. It should become wholly deed and, if possible, wholly song' (*Rage and Time*, 9).

Sloterdijk acknowledges that he has been anticipated in his argument about the unrecognised importance of thymos by Francis Fukuyama's 1992 *The End of History*, which he here characteristically sticks up for against its many detractors, while also drawing on the sociobiological arguments of Heiner Mühlmann regarding the fundamental role in culture formation of 'maximal stress cooperation'. But the originality of his argument is in the link he makes between rage and temporality. For the strength of rage, which may be defined as the passionate inability to tolerate delay, is also its weakness, since rage is so apt to squander itself, in glorious but ultimately ineffective effusion. In order to maximise its powers, rage must be concentrated, agglomerated, saved up. In the process, rage becomes revenge, and the ever-lengthening interval between offence and vengeance produces the history. Subjected in this way to time, rage gives to time its very temper and tonality. As 'a vector that creates a tension between then, now, and later' (*Rage and Time*, 60), the desire for revenge is the most perfected form of the human sense of project.

But there is an economic as well as a temporal dimension to rage. And, given that the name for the system for making time and economics equivalent is capitalism, Sloterdijk would have us think in

terms of a veritable capitalism of rage. The religious prehistory to this is set out in a chapter entitled 'The Wrathful God'. The capacity of Judaism to defer yet nurture revenge for its wrongs makes Israel, along with Greece, 'the most important export nation for rage-manufacturing systems' (*Rage and Time*, 91), its most important trading partner of course being Christianity, whose eschatology Sloterdijk reads as a system for maintaining through history 'a transcendent archive of rage' (*Rage and Time*, 97) which will be made good only on the Day of Judgement. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought about a secular diversification of this system, which never got beyond the primitive accumulations of the treasure-house or savings bank, into an ever more complex and intricately administered system of rage accounting and transaction.

Just as it is hard to keep one's rage at melting point, so Sloterdijk seems to find it hard to keep his focus on the topic of rage. The central concern of *Rage and Time* turns out to be the history of revolutionary politics over the last century, and his primary purpose to show that the refusal of capitalism depends upon the 'capitalization of resentment' (*Rage and Time*, 66). The longest chapter in the book, 'The Rage Revolution', is in fact a sustained, angry denunciation of the ways in which hatred and revenge were used to keep 'the Communist world bank of rage' solvent, allowing for the unimaginable industrialisation of slaughter in Russia, China, Cambodia and elsewhere, instances of administered left holocaust that make the Nazis look like garden-shed hobbyists.

It is disappointing to find so perversely but productively idiosyncratic a thinker falling back into the familiar kinds of argument that Sloterdijk sometimes does. A great deal is made in *Rage and Time* for example of the 'mobilisation of a patriotic thymotics' (*Rage and Time*, 162) in the new Soviet state, or the 'methodical substitution of collective fury for missing revolutionary energies' in Mao's cultural revolution (*Rage and Time*, 168), but Sloterdijk's affective economics do not seem to add very much here to the familiar principle that a weak regime can create unity by concentrating hostility towards an inside or outside threat. The pay-off for Sloterdijk's arguments here will also seem disappointing to many, and certainly to nearly all those who still dream of more absolute and irreversible forms of transformation in human relations. Accepting that rage and its thymotic siblings are likely to be intensified rather than dispersed by the extension of liberal capitalism, Sloterdijk will offer no general formula for the containment or surpassing of rage. 'It is not possible to integrate a universe out of energetic, thymotic, irritable actors through ideal syntheses from the top. It is only possible to keep it at a balance through power relationships' (*Rage and Time*, 229).

God's Zeal appeared as *Gottes Eifer* in 2007, the year after *Zorn und Zeit*, and is in many ways an elaboration of its arguments. Where *Zorn und Zeit* had presented religious rage as an historical preliminary to revolutionary rage, Sloterdijk here considers the persistence and even revival of religious affect and motive in the modern world. Sloterdijk's emphasis is on what, following Carl Schmitt, he calls the 'world-taking' or imperialist dimensions of the three monotheisms that presently circle round each other in the Middle East. The driving force here is now not so much anger as that religious ardency known as 'zeal'. Sloterdijk begins his analysis of religious militancy coolly enough, with a functionalist account of the 'noetic supremacism' of monotheistic religion as the result of various forms of human overestimation of the large, all of which involve the hyperbolic lifting of the relatively, or adjectivally transcendent into the substantive or supreme form of the transcendent as such. Thus, for example, the idea of transcendence depends in part upon the misunderstanding of slowness – meaning that processes that take longer than a lifetime tend to be consigned to the transcendent.

The book then embarks on a switchback history of the development of the three monotheisms, with the zealotic principle doing the work done by the thymotic in *Rage and Time*. But the zealotic is more paradoxical than the thymotic, since it is inherently imitative and competitive ('zeal' has often been used to render Latin 'aemulatio'). Because the One and Only can only be guaranteed by the subjection of others, every universalism will involve some kind of set-theoretical paradox, which means that all three monotheisms understand without letting themselves know that 'one can only invite everyone if one can be sure that not everyone will come' (*God's Zeal*, 130). The zealotic rivalry is not only with the infidel, for the zeal of the believer is always ultimately an image and rival of the zeal of God himself, in that it redoubles and magnifies 'God's regret at having created the world', the zealot striving to hate the world more even than God does (*God's Zeal*, 24). The origin of zeal, it emerges late in the book, lies 'in bringing everything down to the number one, which tolerates no one and nothing beside itself' (*God's Zeal*, 96). Zealotic forms of monotheism aim to close the breach opened up by time between the absolute and primary divine Law and the infuriatingly approximate, lapsing, elapsing deuteronomy of the world. The paradox is that, like rage, this kind of zeal for first and last things is itself historiogenic, since world history comes into being from the moment that everything is held to be the unfolding of a single principle and aimed towards a single terminus of self-abolishing consummation.

Instead of the ultimately suicidal and cosmoclastic principle of zeal, which always 'leaps into the realm of the absolutely final' (*God's Zeal*,

141), a principle which makes revolution equivalent to revelation, Sloterdijk maintains the necessity of judging from the middle. This means accepting worldliness: the necessity of working within 'the liberal state under the rule of law, democracy and capitalism' (*God's Zeal*, 145), while yet refusing to abandon an horizon of ethical comprehensiveness and conviviality. This is not to be achieved once and for all through revelation or the politics of revolutionary intemperance, but uncertainly approached through a process of 'civilizational learning towards an existence of all human beings characterized by the universally imposed necessity of sharing a single planet' (*God's Zeal*, 145–6). Sloterdijk shares with the cosmopolitics articulated in the recent work of Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers and Michel Serres the principle that the number one should be sovereign with regard to the earth but treated with suspicion and even derision when applied to the idea of God. The importance of Sloterdijk's work is in articulating a critical humanism that wrests back the monopoly on radical critique from all forms of philosophical supremacism which, with respect to the good, 'wish to force the final decision' (*God's Zeal*, 157). But this critique is powered by an intransigent and unabashed conviction that 'the path of civilization is the only one that is still open' (*God's Zeal*, 18).

Notes

- 1 Peter Sloterdijk, *Schäume: Sphären*, vol. 3, *Plurale Sphärologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), 64 (my translation).
- 2 *Ibid.*, 87.
- 3 Michel Serres, *La Guerre mondiale* (Paris: Le Pommier, 2008), 149 (my translation).

Further reading

Connor, Steven, *The Matter of Air: Science and Art of the Ethereal* (London: Reaktion, 2010).

Latour, Bruno, and Peter Weibel (eds), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005).

Mühlmann, Heiner, *The Nature of Cultures: Blueprint For a Theory of Cultural Genetics*, trans. Robert Payne (New York and Vienna: Springer Verlag, 1996).

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—, vol. 1. *Blasen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998).

—, vol. 2. *Globen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999).

—, vol. 3. *Schäume: Plurale Sphärologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004).

Stengers, Isabelle, *Cosmopolitics I*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).