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Houston, We Have a Problem. Sloterdijk and the Anthropocene

Mirko Alagna – University of Firenze, Italy
Contact: mirko.alagna@unifi.it

ABSTRACT

Island, raft, bell, greenhouse, hot-air balloon, cruise ship, spaceship: These are some of the metaphors mobilized by Peter Sloterdijk to describe the spaces within which the human being is born and reproduces itself, from the Pleistocene to the Anthropocene. The aim of this contribution is to reconstruct these passages and, above all, to analyze how the metaphor of the spaceship succeeds in describing some aspects of our current condition, while risking leaving others in the shade.

KEYWORDS

Sloterdijk; Anthropocene; Foam; Spaceship; Freedom.

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Polyhedral, controversial, polemic, prolific; this is only a small sample of adjectives that can be associated with Peter Sloterdijk (and his thought). Culturally bulimic and deliberately digressing, the reading of his texts resembles the crossing of a swarm of research cues, always connected by crossways, hybrid figures, lexical assonances. It is difficult to find straight lines, yet his thought does not lose its compactness – precisely on the basis of continuous archaeological and ethnographic *détours*. The effect for the reader is as fascinating as it is disorienting: within a production that is endless and – in my opinion – highly recursive and self-reflective, we find crowd together recurring knots, leitmotifs, metaphors always updated with new nuances or partially resemantized.¹ At each re-reading different links are identified, the emphasis shifts, and as in a kaleidoscope at the end result in overall images never completely overlapping. It is Sloterdijk himself to invite readers to exploit the polysemy of his texts, to join the dots in new forms: his trilogy of the Spheres closes with a retrospective in which a theologian, a macro-historian and a literary critic discuss that same text, revealing the different possible interpretations, thus invalidating the author's primacy over the text and implicitly inciting readers to play with that writing, to bring out its potentiality well beyond the author's intentions and abilities.

Here, one of the (many) ways in which it is possible to go through Sloterdijk's production –² that is to say, one of the (many) ways in which it is possible to connect the different nodes of his reflection – is to collect and line up the metaphors used to describe the space in which human beings arise and live. It may seem a completely useless move, since it slavishly follows the fundamental heart of Sloterdijk's proposal: all of his thought can be summarized as an investigation into the internal spaces in which the human being arises and lives: the *spheres* – and their triple declination in *bubbles*, *globes* and *foam* – refer exactly to this topic. My proposal, however, is to concentrate on the images and metaphors – so to speak – of the “second level”: those mobilized from time to time to give greater concreteness and intuitiveness to the “first level” metaphor constituted by the sphere and its triple declination. An essential list, which emerges even on a relatively superficial reading, is as follows: island, raft, bell, greenhouse, hot-air balloon, cruise ship, spaceship. There is a family air among these figures: in all cases, they are used to represent the creation of spaces within which the absolutism of the reality has been

1 Cfr. Jean-Pierre Couture, 'A Public Intellectual', in *Sloterdijk Now*, ed. Stuart Elden (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 96–113.

2 Other interesting perspectives, covered by critical literature in Italian are: D. Consoli, *Introduzione a Peter Sloterdijk. Il mondo come coesistenza* (Genova: il melangolo, 2017); A. Lucci, *Peter Sloterdijk* (doppiozero, 2014); T. Ariemma, *Immagini e corpi. Da Deleuze a Sloterdijk* (Roma: Aracne, 2010); G. Bonaiuti, *Lo spettro sfinito. Note sul parassitismo metodico di Peter Sloterdijk* (Milano: Mimesis, 2019); A. Lucci, *Un'acrobatica del pensiero. La filosofia dell'esercizio di Peter Sloterdijk* (Roma: Aracne, 2014); A. Lucci, *Il limite delle sfere. Saggio su Peter Sloterdijk* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2011); the «aut aut» monographic edition *Esercizi per cambiare la vita. In dialogo con Peter Sloterdijk*, n. 355 (2012); M. Pavanini (eds.), *Lo spazio dell'umano. Saggi dopo Sloterdijk* (Napoli: Kajak, 2020).

liberalized; spaces in which a lighter atmosphere prevails and we can settle down and relax, as individuals and as species. The order of exposition, however, is not accidental: with the exception of the “greenhouse” – authentic continuous bass in Sloterdijk’s reflection – those different second-level metaphors seem to accompany and represent the entire arc of the history of *homo sapiens* from the dawn to our days – that is: from the Pleistocene to the Anthropocene.

1. Raft, island, bell, greenhouse

According to Sloterdijk, “if there is anything that could unconditionally demand the amazement of laypersons and the astonishment of scholars, it is the existence of those large political bodies that were formerly known as “peoples” and are now, thanks to a questionable semantic convention, termed “societies”.³ The history of political ideas is basically the history of the techniques of co-existence. The failure to perceive this improbability is the result of a perspective error: the oblivion of the Pleistocene, that is, having imagined that the genesis of the human being and the rise of the first great civilizations were practically coincident phenomena, or separated by a contract. Sloterdijk starts from those magmatic millennia in which hominination occurs, and identifies there the first paleopolitical formation: the horde. The horde is the incubator, the womb of the human being – that is to say, using his own words: an island, a raft, a tent, a greenhouse. The beginning (of human history) is in the horde: this proto-social ensemble of about a hundred specimens held together by blood ties is an island in the sea of the world, therefore able to develop its own insular climate and a specific atmosphere unnaturally light and lightening. The singular burdens of vigilance are lightened as they are shared, the temperature is raised thanks to the common distance from the fire, the silence of the world is broken by a sound bell that circumscribes the very first *lessico familiare*.⁴ We hear each other (*hören*) because we are together (*zusammengehören*); what will become language does not arise from the coordination needs of groups of men on the hunt, but from the evolution and modulation of maternal chants. In this way, the horde is configured as a humanizing environment. Certainly, humans humanize the environment, but the force of this evidence (and the oblivion of the origins of the species) has obscured the opposite vector: the environment humanizes the hominid. The productive cycle of the human begins according to the form O-A-U (hominids, environment, humans) and continues uninterrupted in the form U-A-U’ (humans, environment, humans always different). This means that to understand the human as a species we must analyze the atmosphere in which it is immersed and that makes possible its genesis

3 Peter Sloterdijk, *Stress and Freedom* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015), 3.

4 Cfr. Natalia Ginzburg, *Lessico familiare* (Torino: Einaudi, 2010).

and reproduction.⁵

In the horde begins then “the revolutionary incubation of the counter-natural in nature itself”,⁶ and the fundamental figure of its contronaturalness is given by the attenuation of gravity and heaviness; in this greenhouse arises the human being as a creature who can afford to lose some traits of animality until then essential: heads become “strangely large, skin strangely thin, women strangely beautiful, legs strangely long, voices strangely articulated, sexuality strangely chronic, children strangely infantile, the dead strangely unforgettable”.⁷ Thanks to the greenhouse effect of the horde the emergence of the human face from the animal snout becomes possible, describing a selection that begins to follow aesthetic parameters, absolutely unrelated to the maximization of the chances of biological survival; it is human is what derails towards beauty. It is only in the raft – or in the tent – of the horde that the human being arises as a creature that not only can afford a long childhood, but that even maintains childlike traits throughout its biographical parabola. Humans are not ill-equipped for life in the world, if only because they never live in the world tout court, but precisely in protected and climatized spheres (rafts, islands, tents), so that they embody the luxury of remaining partially childlike, immature. We are never in the world *sans phrase* – or rather: there is no possible humanity in the world *sans phrase*; the *homo* species is born exactly at the moment in which the hominid finds itself in an air-conditioned and lightened space; a (partially and imperfectly) immunized space in which is possible wasting energy on the superfluous, making decisions according to useless parameters. The outside is filtered rather than removed: however threatening, it always remains (also) as a space available for the extroversion of negativity and as a reserve of material useful for the development of the inside.

2. Hot-air balloon

From the raft to the hot-air balloon, the jump is abysmal – even in a trivial chronological sense: the hot-air balloon is an invention of modernity and a symbol of modernity. In both cases, however, we are describing in allegorical way the construction of spaces with reduced gravity and lightened atmosphere; the hot-air balloon expresses “only” on the one hand the extreme intensification of this anti-gravitational process and, on the other, the victory of the technological way in the search for lightening, against the acrobatic ascetic elevation. The semantics of anti-gravitation is one of the recurrent lines of all Sloterdijk’s reflection, intersecting two declensions that are reciprocally connected yet profoundly different, two

5 Cfr. Marie-Eve Morin, ‘The Coming-to-the-World of the Human Animal’, in *Sloterdijk Now*, ed. Stuart Elden (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012), 77–98.

6 Peter Sloterdijk, *Im Selben Boot. Versuch über die Hyperpolitik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), 19 (my translation).

7 *Ibid.*, 20 (my translation).

strategies of neutralization of gravity: elevation and lightening. The first foresees the implementation by individuals of a whole range of exercises (pompously called “metaphysics”) capable of making practitioners reach acrobatic levels of elevation and overcoming gravity; it is the ascetic way to flight, whereby gravity is defeated thanks to the elevation of the hard-trained individual. The second way, typically modern, aims at overcoming gravity by lightening the world, not by elevating the individual. It is no longer necessary to become an ascetic in order to fly: it is sufficient to get into a hot-air balloon.

“In modernity, the metanoic imperative [*you must change your life*] increasingly changed into a prescription of ‘outward application’,”⁸ declining into: you must change the world and in this way you will change your life and the life of everyone else. Ascetics give way to teachers, inventors and entrepreneurs who, in different fields, modify the social field with the effects of their actions; political reforms, technical or cultural innovations: they aim at making life easier, more comfortable and less burdensome. Sloterdijk speaks of “historic compromise between self-improvement and world improvement”.⁹ It is the second Silver Age: it is useless to dwell on paraphrases, what he has in mind is the contemporary Western world, *sive* the Crystal Palace. The heaviness of the 20th century was the tail end of heaviness *tout court*; undertrack, and visibly since the second post-war period, an aeonic shift has developed: the *uprising* of Western masses from poverty (*extreme*, with the consequent spread of the ubiquitous relative poverty). Not the age of extremes, but the entry into the first non-mythical epoch of post-scarcity: “probably for the first time since the entrance of remembrance into our space of tradition, the climate of reality in contemporary Western ‘society’ is no longer determined primarily by poverty-related themes and the psycho semantics of hardship”.¹⁰ It is not a matter of denying obscene inequalities or contingent regressions – “the plateau from which its denizens will be forced by regressions to descend temporarily or for longer periods is, from a sociohistorical perspective, incomparably high” –¹¹ but of adopting a macro-historical gaze and even a materialist posture: what we see is the popularization of access to exquisite commodities and relieving machines. The five weights of the old reality are under attack: hunger bites a small, historically unprecedented number of Palace dwellers; fatigue recedes following the mass emancipation from agricultural labor, the outsourcing of industrial labor, and the subcontracting of logistics labor, while homes have filled with lightening tools and air conditioning; the libido has free rein after the sexual revolution; power has been domesticated with elections and constitutions, a war with mass conscription does not seem to be on the agenda, and the

8 Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 369.

9 *Ibid.*, 372.

10 Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres III. Foam* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2016), 634–35.

11 *Ibid.*, 644–45.

State becomes an institution in charge of allocating resources and amortizing risks; death does not disappear, but recedes, is often bloodless and at least technically could become “sweet”. To this list Sloterdijk adds the legitimization of individual taste, the availability of cultural content, the prolongation of lifetime devoted to education, the change of family structures, the expansion of the possibilities of movement, the availability of treatments performed under anesthesia, the fact that most of the living of the last generations are sons and daughters expressly wanted and sought (and therefore hopefully loved).

It is impossible to summarize 200 pages of panegyric of the anti-gravity vice; according to Sloterdijk this *cahier des luxes* is an essential prerequisite to recognize and deal with the unprecedented problems of the unburdened existence and to cope with the available theoretical and political traditions – all equally anachronistic in his opinion. In this context, however, more than his *redde rationem* with the modern political tradition, it is interesting his description of the Hot-Air Balloon Age and the analysis of its assumptions and vectors; his position is clear: The Great Relief was based on the energy surplus provided by coal and hydrocarbons as universal workers: “access to fossil energy is the objective crutch of the frivolity without which there would be no consumer society, no automobilism and no global market for meat or fashion.”¹² Thanks to fossil fuels and motorized machines the anti-gravity dynamics reaches unprecedented – both for altitude and extension – levels of relief in the millennial history of *homo sapiens*. The exploitation of man by man becomes shocking at the very moment in which it appears avoidable thanks to “man’s methodical exploitation of the Earth”;¹³ what for centuries has been the normal (harsh and bitter) reality – the relief of the few through the service of the many – becomes intolerable at the moment in which it appears realistic a collective relief through the intensive exploitation of the Earth conceived as a resource to be technically dominated. It is from this moment that the upward and lightening forces acquire an unprecedented energy and (Western) societies are filled with an increasing number of lightning machines enlivened by fossil fuels. Sloterdijk does not resist the temptation to draw from this a thesis of philosophy of history alternative to the Marxian one: more than history of class struggles, “all narratives about changes in the human condition are narratives about the changing exploitation of energy sources – or descriptions of metabolic regimes” –¹⁴that is: tell me what kind of energy sources you use and I will tell you who you are. In this perspective, consistently, “the petroleum bath is baptism for contemporary human beings”.¹⁵

12 Ibid., 163.

13 Peter Sloterdijk, *What Happened in the 20th Century?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 131.

14 Ibid., 132.

15 Ibid., 136–37.

This thesis with its *geschichtsphilosophisch* sonority must be taken very seriously; the advent of fossil fuels – i.e. their usability as energy sources – unhinges and overturns the meaning of many ontological categories that constituted the infrastructure of the vetero-European experience of the world. A first example, hiddenly, has already been made, and it concerns precisely the meaning associated to the concept of *reality*. It is (also and above all) the diffusion of motorized machines powered by coal or oil that gave a constructivist bent to the concept of reality; “reality” (hard and bitter) ceased to denote what cannot be otherwise, what must be accepted in its heaviness, and became perceived instead as something malleable, that can always be modified and can be (made) different from what it currently is. Inventiveness – and no longer resignation – becomes the passion associated with the experience of reality. It is not by chance that modernity is the era of revolutions: it is not (only) a matter of variations on the theme archetypically expressed by the French proto-socialists – exploiting the Earth together and stop exploiting each other among humans –, but more generally of the snowball effect caused by the evidence that, through the mediation of adequate techniques, even the hardest core of reality was actually modifiable – it was even possible to fly!

Moreover: revolutions do not “simply” indicate a change, but more specifically a rapid, potentially instantaneous change. In other words: an *explosive* change. It is not by chance, Sloterdijk seems to suggest, that revolutions and the exploitation of fossil fuels are coeval:

“Active treasure, which is what we are here referring to, coal and petroleum (other forms of biosynthesis, too, later), embodies the principle of getting something for free in a typically modern way. This is because such a principle is suited for rapid combustion and for producing immediate effects, in stark contrast to its predecessor – the Earth as bearer of slow growth. Active treasure is the actual agent of the principle of immediacy”.¹⁶ Only an era shaped by the explosive force of fossil fuels can realistically think to overturn reality with a *coup de grâce*.

Coal and oil (and engines able to exploit their combustion) represent therefore the philosopher’s stone searched in vain by alchemists – and found instead by miners, technicians, engineers. Without fossil fuels “there would be no capitalism, no widespread affluence, no welfare state, and no trace of anything that constitutes the *modus vivendi* of the current Western system of comforts”;¹⁷ but even more, there would not have been the (constructivist) idea of reality that has made modernity the testing ground for countless political, social, technical and cultural experiments. There would have been no freedom understood as “the right to unlimited mobility and festive squandering of energy”;¹⁸ Sloterdijk coined a specific expression:

16 Ibid., 152.

17 Ibid., 151.

18 Ibid., 138.

“kinetic expressionism”, precisely to condense “modernity’s mode of existence, which was primarily made possible by the ready availability of fossil fuel”.¹⁹ The point is twofold: on the one hand, oil-powered machines are vectors not only of comfort, but also of freedom, as they make possible previously unthinkable experiences and perform tasks freeing time that humans can devote to other things. On the other hand, those fuels also “blazes in our existential motivations, in our vital conceptions of freedom. We can no longer imagine a freedom that does not always also include the freedom to rev our engines and accelerate, the freedom to move to the most distant destinations, the freedom to exaggerate, the freedom to waste, indeed, lastly, even the freedom to detonate explosives and destroy ourselves”.²⁰ Lightening of reality and extreme freedom clearly go hand in hand: the reality principle ceases to be a constraint and become a stimulus to exercise freedom in the work of perpetual modification of reality. The freedom of the moderns was born as a spur to overcome limits – as condensed by the motto of Charles V: *plus ultra* – and develops itself in the form of being without limits.

The Age of the Hot-Air Balloon is, in short, the era of extreme and explosive lightening. The Earth appears here in the dual role of coffer of the most amazing treasures and neutral background in which all undesired effects are diluted, absorbed and finally disappear. The Hot-Air Balloon Age conceptually divides *missions* and *emissions*: the former – increasingly daring and acrobatic – indicate specific goals and mobilize the necessary fossil and technical arsenal; the latter name the side effects of the missions: the disregarded effects, which fall into a vacuum capable of absorbing them; if the Hot-Air Balloon Age is an era of extreme experimentalism (technical, political, cultural), emissions are the quantities knowingly neglected in a controlled experiment.

However high they may soar, hot air balloons land. It is taken for granted that they can dock on stable ground, recharge the burner, rest before another trip. Precisely for this reason they may no longer represent the best metaphor for describing the space in which we live.

3. Spaceships, cruise ships (and foams)

There are cases in which “metaphor [...] represents the higher form of the concept”.²¹ The important feature of metaphor is its “practical force”: “its truth is revealed in the pertinence of its implications for the real situation”

19 Peter Sloterdijk, ‘The Anthropocene – A Stage in the Process on the Margins of the Earth’s History?’, in *What Happened in the 20th Century?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 29.

20 Ibid., 30.

21 Ibid., 26.

–²² it is a *verité à faire*.²³ Metaphor has a “performance truth” where linguistic-descriptive precision is still limping (and yet we have urgency to act). The contemporary situation is, according to Sloterdijk, one of these cases, and so he proposes a battery of metaphors: Buckminster Fuller’s *Spaceships Earth*; Phileas Fogg’s ship forced to self-combust; the cruise ship as a floating self-sufficient city. With different accents, in all cases it is a matter of making intuitive what must become the first task of the human being, the Anthropocene imperative: act in such a way as not to consume the internal space in which you live because there is no outside (or at least it has no resources and is not humanly livable). In Sloterdijk’s terms, “ships – and environments in general – can no longer be regarded merely as maternal containers that protect and care for us under all conditions”; it is necessary for humans to learn how to “repair their ships, their systems, their institutions”.²⁴ The central point is, in all cases, that astronauts and sailors have always known what humanity now needs to learn: that the inner space in which human life is possible is an artifact and cannot therefore be taken for granted; not (anymore) a foundation but a construct, not (anymore) a base but a vehicle.²⁵ Several practical and cognitive corollaries derive from this: first of all the need to explicitly formalize that the first interest of a crew must be the maintenance of livable conditions within the *artificium*. Secondly, the conceptual difference between missions and emissions collapses – i.e. ignorance is no longer allowed; it no longer makes sense to distinguish between scientifically researched objectives and the side effects of that research, since those effects now far exceed in magnitude any possible objective. Thirdly, it is necessary to overturn the relationship between error and learning: we need to learn *before* making mistakes, and not *from* them.²⁶ Those three images – the spaceship, the cruise ship, Fogg’s ship – play different roles in Sloterdijk’s thought: the first two have a normative value – you must act aware of living in a spaceship – while the last one responds to more descriptive needs – we are burning the vessel that keeps us afloat, and in our case there is not even a port on the horizon. All three, however, effectively condense some fundamental aspects of our situation, but this effectiveness is paid with a certain simplification that emerges if we adopt the most obvious point of view: ours, that is, of those who are inside the spaceship. From our perspective this spaceship appears divided and fragmented inside, teeming with pilots, incredibly complex and confused. It is therefore worth recovering the first level metaphor coined by Sloterdijk: *foam*.

22 Sloterdijk, ‘The Anthropocene – A Stage in the Process on the Margins of the Earth’s History?’

23 Cfr. Hans Blumenberg, *Weltbilder und Weltmodelle*, in: «Nachrichten der Gießener Hochschulgesellschaft», Gießen, 30 (1961), p. 69

24 Peter Sloterdijk, ‘The Ocean Experiment: From Nautical Globalization to a General Ecology’, in *What Happened in the 20th Century?* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 87.

25 Sloterdijk, ‘The Anthropocene – A Stage in the Process on the Margins of the Earth’s History?’, 26.

26 *Ibid.*, 29.

What is foam? On the one hand, foam describes a world too wide and interconnected to be cut and reduced through the setting aside of large sections in indifference and irrelevance: the *saturated* world has no external spaces to be ignored, into which negativity can be poured without fear of reactions and counter-movements. On the other hand, it is also the form of every section of the world, which has also become too wide, regardless of its actual size, as it is inhabited by individuals who are increasingly mutually different, dissimilar, unique. In the hyperfractionated world diversity explodes in our hands both because we can no longer ignore and erase any of the extreme diversities present on the entire globe (they react, we depend on them, we are reachable and connected) and because we are increasingly individualistically different from each other, within the remnants of the old spheres. Foam therefore signals both vectors: both the amassing of more or less large bubbles, forced to touch each other without being able to ignore and distance themselves, and the internal fractioning of what thought to be a homogeneous sphere.

Let us focus on the first vector: it is gone the era in which, from Florence, I could sovereignly disregard what was happening in Southeast Asia or Central America – if the backlash came, it would take decades; now a war in Syria or Ukraine is visible immediately in the news, causes within weeks the arrival of refugees in my neighborhood and an escalation of political tensions, raises gas or oil prices, causes a surge in feed prices and thus farm meat prices etc. Intensive breeding, deforestation, eating habits of an unknown region of China become the breeding stock of a *spillover* that within a month forces me to stay home for a year.

According to Sloterdijk we need to invent new immunizing practices suitable for the Astronautic Age of intensified and self-conscious foam. The model that became classic in the Hot-Air Balloon Age – explosive creativity and productive efficiency *plus* externalization of negativity – is completely ineffective under the new conditions. In the foam, immunity is only possible as *co-immunity*; this is not unexpected altruism, but a physical law: the bubbles in the foam share boundaries and therefore each bubble lives and survives only if all contiguous bubbles live and survive. All of them have to take care of the membranes that both unite and separate them, all of them have to regulate and purify the flows that circulate within them and that always filter (even if only for metabolic needs) into the neighboring bubbles. Each bubble is only safe, and therefore immune, if the overall scaffolding of the foam, if each bubble-bubble boundary is sufficiently functioning and elastic. They are *too close to fail*.

Compared to the macrospheric immune model, typical of the time of the hot-air balloon, there are two enormous differences: first, the centrality of the borders. In the macrosphere, the border was a fracture and a barrier: they marked the limit of the center's expansive force (and the line in which the forces of two contiguous centers touch each other). The centrality

always belonged to the center; it decided the identity and homogeneity of the internal space, conceived as an irradiation of that focal point; the frontier was empty space, which could only relate to its center. In the foam, on the contrary, borders are the essential carriers of every bubble and therefore they require a constant and mutual care: they are con-tended. They cease to be the limit of a/the world and become threshold, regulatory filter, place of inevitable passage of people, goods, information, fashions, music, viruses. The second big difference is tensegrity. The macrosphere aspired to solidity and compactness, it was all the more immunizing the more solid and strong it was; borders are again emblematic: their effectiveness was directly proportional to their impenetrability. This method no longer works in the foam: one cannot control what arises in the other bubbles, one cannot distance and detach oneself in order to escape a possible domino effect, it is ridiculous to think that one can hermetically close oneself to the contaminations coming from the other microspheres and an empty external space is no longer available. The immunity in the foam is based on and achieved by training elasticity and adaptability of its elements: when an element of the foam is modified, the change is felt by the whole structure, but the structure holds up thanks to its ability to flex without breaking, adapting, balancing itself in the new situation and finding integrity thanks to the balance of tensions. Without distance and empty spaces, pressure cannot escape, and without elasticity, exaggerated pressure causes catastrophes.

Many of the concepts used by Sloterdijk sound decidedly more concrete (and sometimes sinister) after the pandemic wave. Air has returned to the center of our concerns, making explicit our being-in-the-world as being-in-the-air²⁷ (potentially loaded with *droplets* and viruses); the image of the expanded subject immersed in a cohabited atmosphere has become brutally perspicuous: each of us lives immersed in a sphere of vapor (literally: atmosphere) produced also by our own exhalations – and this is why we wear masks to filter this atmosphere. The pandemic event was revolutionary – à la Sloterdijk: that is, it was a massive vector of explication of the foamy structure of reality. At each wave, the same scenes: an outbreak, the illusion of being detached and isolated, the expansion of contagion. Each time the reflexes of macrospheric hypnosis were triggered: what is happening in China will not reach Italy, what is terrorizing Italy will not affect France, what has filtered through France will not be a British problem, and so on, in a succession of increasingly dangerous delays. Borders, empty spaces, long times, are the afterthoughts that have guided the (in)action: the belief that borders are impassable limits of a world and that “leachates” take decades to develop and who knows how many things will have changed in the meantime. Instead, each time the contagion has started again, precisely because in the foam we are fatally

27 Cfr. Sloterdijk, *Spheres III. Foam*, 85-178, § ‘Airquake’.

bordering, interconnected and interdependent. This condition is unavoidable – tourists, caregivers, laborers, truck drivers, gas, raw materials, food, researchers, football competitions and TV sets: too many performances indispensable in the bubble depend on a constant exchange between all the foam.

In this scenario, even the need to think of immunization as co-immunity gains new evidence: containing the circulation of the virus in the whole foam, preventing the emergence of variants, avoiding the overload of health systems are all “well-intended” immunities, attempts to achieve that co-immunization that alone guarantees *chances* of singular immunity. On the other hand, as we can see, this does not mean harmony and cooperation; rather, it means a moving landscape of decisions dictated by decisions of others, reactions to behaviors implemented or by other bubbles. The virus containment strategy, the reopening plan, the organization of the vaccination campaign depend closely on strategies, plans and organizations implemented or imagined elsewhere. No sovereign and unilateral decision, but a patchwork of reactions to reactions. What we call “power” is revealed as the momentary point of equilibrium of the foamy structure, the contingent result of a plurality of different and contradictory tensions that add up and compensate each other – and in the face of ever new disproportions the whole foam settles down on new balances. In short, the inconsistency of an image of power as a compact and monolithic “thing” owned by someone to the detriment of others has become dramatically visible; what emerges is a mobile and foamy picture with contrasts, negotiations, momentary alliances, strategies of direct and indirect conditioning. A picture, in fact, also “dramatic”, as no one clearly has control of the situation, no one has a clear plan and the tools to put it into practice, but everybody bets in a more or less risky way: hundreds of pilots occupy different areas of the spaceship, react to the reactions of others while it is not known where the spaceship itself is going.

The utopia of a frothy world, mindful of the pandemic lesson, would sound like this: “a global co- immunity structure is born, with a respectful inclusion of individual cultures, particular interests and local solidarities [...]. A romanticism of brotherliness is replaced by a cooperative logic. Humanity becomes a political concept [...]. Civilization is one such structure. Its monastic rules must be drawn up now or never; they will encode the forms of anthropotechnics that befit existence in the context of all contexts”.²⁸

Beautiful, too beautiful. Sloterdijk mobilizes here a part of his theoretical arsenal and in fact his appeal, retranslated without emphasis, sounds like this: the global expansion of interconnections and the exponential increase of human power on Earth has reached its limit; since there are no more “empty spaces”, the classic immunization mechanism of protectionism/

28 Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, 451–52.

externalization has definitively jammed: either we will save ourselves together, or no one will be safe. The argument holds, and the pandemic offers an immediate example. However. Sloterdijk's bet is all cognitive: it seems that it is sufficient to reveal to humanity the foamy structure of our world, show them the anachronism of old immune systems, explain them the physics of foam *et voilà* everybody will be ready for the new monastic civilization. It seems that the problem is "only" ignorance: if we really understand that we live in a foam, most of our problems would be solved. The point, concrete, is that illusions work even when improbable, and they have reality effects even when the effect is potential suicide. We know that a vaccination campaign focused on the Palace is dangerous: variants could arise and invalidate our efforts; yet we are behaving like this. One (absurd) afterthought is the same as always: if it happens, this time we will be able to isolate ourselves, to detach ourselves from the foam; the other (more understandable), whisper that this time too we will find the solution – a drug, an update of the vaccine, yet another amazing scientific leap forward. Better to flip a coin than wait longer and delay (semi-) normality again. In short, we know that the only immunity now possible is the shared one, the problem is not ignorance: the problem is that we still hope or delude ourselves that the next catastrophe will not affect us or that, in the meantime, something will come to save us – after all, it has often happened. All in order not to adopt new lifestyles, objectively more tiring. We all know how we should act in order to reduce our environmental impact, and in many cases we would like to do so; but if we do not act, it is not because of induced ignorance, machinations or other reasons; much more banally and dramatically, the problem is that a whole series of lightening performances have become indispensable to us, we even find it hard to recognize them as luxuries in a historical perspective. We live in the foam and we know it, but we act as if we were driving a hot-air balloon: the success of an image or a metaphor depends not only on its ability to describe the existing, but also (and perhaps above all) on the performances and the kind of behaviors it makes possible.

Sloterdijk himself, in other passages,²⁹ shows himself to be wary (and in the end also worried) about an emphasis on the ethical solution for the Anthropocene: there are few chances that an ecological (and catacomb) Calvinism under the banner of frugality will spread *sua sponte*, there is a strong risk that this frugality will eventually be imposed in the form of an ecological martial law. There is a possible alternative, applying Spinoza's famous phrase to the Earth: no one yet knows what the body of the Earth can do. In the Hot-Air Balloon Age, technical development focused obsessively on how to exploit fossil fuels, but now it has the opportunity to break free from this literally deadly embrace and imagine a completely different interaction between environment and technology; the (potential) future is

29 Cfr. Sloterdijk, 'The Anthropocene – A Stage in the Process on the Margins of the Earth's History?', 31–46.

to be built with a homeotechnology capable of imitating and empowering nature without doing violence to it. It is difficult not to support this hope – which also bans reactionary anti-scientific and anti-modern deviations. And yet, are we maybe once again, deceiving ourselves? Is it a *wishful thinking* – something will save us – that we enthusiastically embrace also because it legitimizes our (implicit) aspiration to go on *business as usual*? The challenge we face – or rather: the challenge in which we are immersed – is maybe too radical to be solved with an acceleration; if the hot-air balloon has overturned the concepts of reality and freedom, evaporating the first and declining the second as unstoppable “kinetic *expressionism*”, it is possible that the Spaceship or Foam Era has in front of itself an equally radical task of re-signification. This means, needless to hide it, that we have (at least) a huge problem: when Sloterdijk states that the demands for moderation and the hopes for a climatic socialism have “all of expressionistic civilization’s momentum against them”,³⁰ he is using an acceptable paraphrase to express an unspeakable: we have a problem with (the modern idea of) freedom.

30 Ibid., 39.

Mirko Alagna is researcher of Political Philosophy at the University of Florence. PhD at the University of Trento, was DAAD fellow at the Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften and research fellow at the University of Milano-Bicocca. He focused on the thought of Max Weber, Hans Blumenberg, Hannah Arendt and Peter Sloterdijk. Author of "Sazi da morire" (AlboVersorio 2012), "Atlanti. Immagini del mondo e forme della politica in Max Weber" (Donzelli 2017), "Superficialismo radicale" (ETS 2021, with L. Mazzone) and "Peter Sloterdijk" (DeriveApprodi 2021). He has also published articles in several Italian and international journals.

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