

# PETER SLOTERDIJK

SELECTED EXAGGERATIONS





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# Peter Sloterdijk

## Selected Exaggerations

Conversations and Interviews  
1993–2012

Edited by Bernhard Klein

Translated by Karen Margolis

polity

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# IN PLACE OF A PREFACE<sup>1</sup>

*Bernhard Klein in conversation with Peter Sloterdijk*

**Karlsruhe, 17 December 2012**

KLEIN: Mr Sloterdijk, after extensive research I have compiled a selection of your interviews over the past two decades, a very compact selection from an enormous wealth of material, but still a weighty volume. I am aware that interviews are only a small part of your publishing activity – the phrase ‘tip of the iceberg’ is very apt here. You have more than forty books to your name, and have also written a large number of essays for a wide range of newspapers, periodicals and anthologies. You have held professorships in Karlsruhe and Vienna for the past twenty years, and you only resigned from the position in Austria quite recently. Aside from this you have had a full timetable as a speaker at all kinds of events, and you have participated in numerous conferences, conventions and symposia. You have given readings from your latest books, and held seminars, ceremonial addresses and after-dinner speeches. You have done interviews in many media and for over ten years you moderated your own TV programme.

According to the general wisdom, ‘less is more’. Why, in your case, is *more* more? Does your almost frantic creative energy express something of the powerlessness every writer feels when faced with the silence of the library?

<sup>1</sup> *Translator’s Note:* Some of the original interview titles have been changed in the German edition of this book and in the present English translation.

All notes are by the translator, with the exception of those marked with an asterisk, which are provided by the German editor.

SLOTTERDIJK: I think the real answer to the question of the main impetus for my work is connected more to an inner state rather than an actual motive. Looking back over the years these interviews cover, my first impression of myself is defencelessness, or the ability to be enticed. The cliché of the born writer's endogenous, ebullient productivity certainly doesn't apply to me, and nor does the model of committed literature. What people see as productivity in my case is usually only my inability to defend myself against suggestions from other people. It starts from a degree of over-compliance. This is ultimately responsible for the constant transition from passivity to production. But this state would not be sustainable without some cockiness. If I took on an additional task, it meant I was prepared to say I could manage that. In the process I sometimes got exhausted, of course, but that was superseded by an incredibly reckless trust in my powers of regeneration. That, incidentally, is the only difference worth mentioning between my earlier life and the present: for a while now, I have noticed that regeneration demands its own time.

KLEIN: Take us into your creative workshop. Can you describe your working technique and explain how you organize your library? How do you remember things?

SLOTTERDIJK: Nobody can really know how his memory works. I only know I must have a well-organized internal archive even if it might seem chaotic to other people. My inner archivist finds access to the important files fairly regularly. He is one collaborator who has never disappointed me. He fortuitously retrieves documents I didn't even know had been filed ready for reference. Sometimes he unwittingly discovers nearly finished pieces of writing that I only have to copy up.

KLEIN: To what extent does your relation to language enhance your zest for writing and publishing?

SLOTTERDIJK: Language is generally seen as a medium for understanding – an assumption that writers shouldn't accept unquestioningly. A critical minority sees language as the starting point of all misunderstandings. Wittgenstein even thought that philosophical problems arose when language goes on holiday – although he didn't reveal to us what he meant by 'going on holiday'. Does it mean being nonsensical? Or poring over pseudo-problems, firing excessive volleys into the air? Anyway, he toyed with the idea that one could just as well do without language; the deflationary tendency is clearly evident. Reading that, I can imagine a wrinkled janitor entering the scene who wants to put an end to the silliness of youth. Statements like that seem narrow to me. You really don't know what might happen if you get involved in going on holiday. I

prefer the opinion of Wittgenstein's fellow Austrian, Egon Friedell, who said: 'Culture is a wealth of problems.' We can try to economise on everything, but not on problems.

KLEIN: So far I have managed to trace around 300 of your interviews in various newspaper archives and on the Internet. Staying with the iceberg image, if we present over thirty selected pieces in this book, this is indeed only the part of the iceberg visible above water. What role do the interviews play in your work as a writer and media personality? Are they there to promote the 'management of your own name', as you yourself once expressed it?

SLOTERDIJK: You know, some highly reputable authors never gave interviews, and some did so only rarely. But there are others who accept interview proposals easily. I count myself among the latter. It involves brand-name management, and that is an offshoot one accepts. With most interviews the reader will notice that even if I thought about that aspect beforehand, I forgot it after a minute at most. The interview is one form of literary production among others, and I see it as a subgenus of the essay. I have practised it frequently since the time I overcame my reluctance and accepted the role of public intellectual that ensued from my first publications. As you can see, I enjoy formulating things and making propositions, and once I am immersed in the flow of speech I stop worrying about the effect. My worries only become acute in the reworking phase. I'm sensitive about failed expressions.

KLEIN: True, your interviews are not one-to-one live publications. You always check them over.

SLOTERDIJK: Let's say they are a mixed form composed of improvisation and edited work. In some cases the editing is limited to just one or two slight touches, but others involve a completely new version.

KLEIN: Over the years, the young, shy Sloterdijk we see in old videotapes has become a star. To me he is like a colossus of expressive force, verbally and in writing. This creative energy, it seems to me, can't be explained by normal standards. It is still a mystery how you have managed this.

SLOTERDIJK: I admit that I have felt many things blowing through me. Now and then I enjoy the powerful cross-draughts, but by no means always. My basic feeling, as I have said, is not of excessive productivity but of receptiveness to evidence from all directions, what I just called defencelessness. In the early stage I usually like the things I am doing, but I quickly lose sight of them. It might sound odd, but if a major work is in the making I only have brief feelings of achievement, and they only happen rarely. I am

incapable of developing such emotions, or of holding on to them. I am always faced with the blank sheet of paper that shows I haven't done anything yet. So I put out my feelers and start from scratch. It may sound absurd, but I usually suspect myself of not doing enough. This probably shows I am lacking in hindsight intelligence. As I don't see my past, I have no choice but to keep moving. Maybe that would be the next lesson: slowing down and returning to the moment. But I'm still wary of such suggestions and dismiss them scornfully as ideas for retired folk.

KLEIN: I have heard you shared a communal apartment when you were younger. How did you manage to be creative in the midst of the chaos? Many people would say in that kind of environment they could never put anything down on paper.

SLOTERDIJK: I didn't actually live in that apartment in Munich but I visited it every day. What I noticed about myself then was the ability not to let anything put me off course. I always had intense relationships, I had close ties to women and male friends, and we went out a lot and travelled frequently. For the past twenty years the family has been my main form of life, and that's not pure solitude either. I can well remember the time when a boisterous toddler ran around my study. It was entertaining for me – I couldn't be disturbed. Today I find it odd that I get irritated more easily. In the past the telephone didn't disturb me, nor did workmen or Jehovah's Witnesses. I saw everything as inspiration, not interruption. A miraculous superstition was at work: whatever happened would immediately be transformed into part of the production. In that middle phase I seemed to be living in a protective shell; I was sure of my own topics, or the topics were sure of me. Nothing could distract me.

KLEIN: When you say 'defencelessness', it suggests being tired and giving up. Evidently you have constantly used the creativity of writing to banish this eventuality.

SLOTERDIJK: Old working animals know that even tiredness can become a motive force if it activates regeneration. Once you have really rested, let's say for a whole day, it feels as if you have gained the energy for three new lives. In the past I used to emphasize the difference between regeneration and a vacation. I saw the latter as illegitimate and thought it had no reason to exist. To put it arrogantly, I used to think you only need a vacation from the wrong life. Today I have changed my mind. Gradually I am coming round to admitting that vacations are justified.

KLEIN: Let me return to your interviews again. At the moment, Suhrkamp Verlag, which has been your publishing house since your

first book thirty years ago, is in the headlines.<sup>2</sup> There was a time at Suhrkamp when its authors were horrified at the idea of publishing anything in a Springer Press newspaper. Now, however, you publish in practically every medium that asks you, almost at random it seems, and you even published something once in *Bild-Zeitung* and *Playboy*. How do you judge yourself in this context? How has the Suhrkamp author changed over the years since the time it was unthinkable to give interviews to Springer Press newspapers?

SLOTERDIJK: One thing is clear: the typical Suhrkamp author no longer exists, if he or she ever did. Actually, the publishing house used to be the imprint for a collection of highly idiosyncratic characters. What do you suppose Bloch and Beckett had in common? Or Hesse and Luhmann? By now the diversity has increased, if anything. Some Suhrkamp authors have retained the spirit of the sixties or seventies and represent softer versions of latter-day Marxism. You can see they are children of the zeitgeist as well because, almost unnoticed, they have changed their topic from utopia to justice – this is where the remnants of the Frankfurt School of civil theology live on. On the other hand, many new shades of personality have emerged in the spectrum, both at the literary and the scholarly ends.

The success of my book in 1983 was a signal for me to look at future fields of action elsewhere. Why not in the previously unthinkable media? Over time I have increasingly discarded inherited aversions. I have met with interview partners from the most politically heterogeneous media without having a hidden agenda of ideological criticism, and, wherever possible, on an equal footing. The only exception is the press of the neo-nationalist strand – in that case my personal background had an influence. Perhaps I should have cast off this inhibition as well, and made occasional home visits to confused extreme right-wing souls.

KLEIN: Many of the interviews in the present volume relate to your new publications at the time, while others take their cue from topics in the air at that particular juncture. Do you remember interviews that especially influenced you?

SLOTERDIJK: Most of the conversations and interviews in the present book happened so long ago that I can't remember the situations they occurred in or, at best, only vaguely. I still have a vivid memory of the circumstances of the wide-ranging two-part interview with Ulrich Raulff, the director of the German Literature

<sup>2</sup> Klein is referring to developments in a lengthy legal battle over ownership and editorial control of Suhrkamp Verlag that began in 2002 and was finally resolved in 2015.

Archive. The theme was ‘Fate’, and it took place about two years ago, the first part in Karlsruhe and the second in Marbach, where Raulff sat opposite me as the host and guardian of his treasures. Those were moments of pure intellectual happiness. At such points one realizes more keenly than usual what literature can be, including in the form of the spoken word. It is a syntactic technique of happiness. The levitation begins with combining two or three words in a non-prosaic fashion.

KLEIN: The present volume is an anthology of trenchant formulations. We get the impression that, for you, dialogue is always a metalogue as well. Many voices come and go in it. The interviews take the form of conversations between two people, but it seems to me you would be most comfortable in conversation with several partners.

SLOTERDIJK: True, I experience dialogue as a polylogue, a conversation with many people. After all, aside from their own voice, good interviewers usually bring all kinds of other voices with them. They are already a chorus of subjectivity themselves. This inevitably creates echoes in the interviewee. If there is anything I really don’t like, it is an exchange of empty phrases that sound like official pronouncements.

KLEIN: We can guarantee there are no empty phrases to be found anywhere in this book.

SLOTERDIJK: Let me explain where my aversion to empty phrases comes from. For as long as I can remember, I have had a childish fear of boredom. I have always thought the most boring things possible are the kind of set speeches you hear in the academic discourse market, not to mention the chipboard sheets from the political DIY store. To avoid misunderstandings, I should say I know a good kind of boredom that is calming and integrating. You can entrust yourself to it like to an old nursery school teacher. I am thinking of the subtle boredom of a landscape, the liberating boredom of the sea, the lofty boredom of the mountains and the boredom of great narrative literature when it sometimes demands patience. An evil boredom emanates from the intrusive bigotry of conceited empty phrasemongers – it is just as deadly as it is reputed to be. Do you know this kind of situation? You exchange a few words with somebody whom you may not even dislike a priori. After three or four sentences back and forth you feel incredibly world-weary. It is as if your vitality battery has been used up within seconds and you don’t know why. I avoid that sort of boredom like the plague. It is a pathological condition that takes away your pleasure in speaking, in expressing opinions, in being able to say what you see, indeed, in life itself. The symptom of severe boredom is speech breakdown. All

at once the words refuse to come out in the right order, you barely manage to squeeze out a noun but the verb doesn't follow, there is an overwhelming, awful feeling of not wanting to say anything else – which should definitely not be confused with the good state of just having nothing to say. Sometimes I almost hit the danger point when I notice a conversation partner is digging up totally hackneyed questions, questions that are essentially ways of dumbing down. They always have the subtext: come and share our misery! I have made a great effort to learn to evade such attacks by reformulating the questions until I regain the desire to react to them.

KLEIN: Do you mean there are questions like vampires that suck the life out of the respondent?

SLOTERDIJK: There are questions like that and questioners like that. In theosophical circles such negatively charged people are called prana suckers, vampires of life's breath. Sometimes the questioner's mental exhaustion is clear from the start. In the best case I try to answer like a tour director or an emergency doctor.

KLEIN: I am absolutely sure there are no interviews in the present book in which you had to play the role of emergency doctor, and nobody who reads these pieces would think of speech breakdown. But I wonder whether we can sense a kind of respect, not to say awe, in your interview partners now and then.

SLOTERDIJK: If it were ever the case, it would have been wrong to leave it like that. Interviews in public are a form of sport in which the point is not to win, but to play for a draw on a higher plane. In every sophisticated question-answer flow the discussion partners remind each other of their more intelligent options. One discovers the pleasure of being able to navigate in a problem space.

KLEIN: I'd like to refer again to the enthusiasm that's often discernible in what you say, whether we call it youthful or not. Your drive for expression started exploding after your India trip in early 1980. Could it be that, after India, you experienced a quasi-archaic pre-lingual enthusiasm that converged with later academic influences? You have probably often been asked this question. I am fascinated that, from then on, there seemed to be no way back for you. Suddenly the only open road led towards productivity.

SLOTERDIJK: It would be better to say, the road to practical testing of a presentiment. I was latently aware that I was living on the quiet. After 1980, the time was ripe for me to start striking out. Back then I found the right note for myself, if one can put it so naively. It was as if I had discovered the instrument for making my kind of music. The instrument was tuned at the moment I realized what my opportunity consisted in.

KLEIN: Naturally, we'd like you to explain that in more detail.

SLOTTERDIJK: Let me try. I was born in 1947 and as a young man I grew up almost without any paternal influence. At the right moment I realized I should decide to be a sort of father to myself. I already had a good idea of what mothering is, whether pre-existing or chosen, and how one gradually leaves it behind. I had no idea what fathering meant. I had to find my fathers and mentors, which meant I had to look in the world around me. Fathers are models we seek to have something to conquer later on, aren't they? So I set off, with admiration as my guideline. Nobody who had something to say was safe from my admiration – or from my disappointment either. The breakthrough came when I understood that I had to explain the world to myself. In my case it could only happen by taking myself in hand – as teacher and student in one. Somehow I managed to duplicate myself into a bigger and a smaller part. So I took myself by the hand and explained the world and life to myself. Evidently this made sense to many observers who enjoyed reading what I said to myself. They probably laughed at how I slipped into the role of the wise old man for the sake of the junior. I still think this method wasn't the worst way to approach the philosophical sphere. It was particularly useful in my case because it fitted the situation of a young person who, like many of his generation, grew up with a strong sense of cultural insecurity.

KLEIN: What made you go East after you finished your dissertation under the professors in Hamburg? What did you learn from the Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, or Osho, as he was also known? Why did you go to India at that time instead of staying at the university?

SLOTTERDIJK: That is a long story I can only sketch briefly here. In 1974 I was offered a post as a temporary assistant professor at Hamburg University. I accepted, and moved to Hamburg. The following year in Hamburg was a very fruitful time for me, a watershed in my life. I was very lucky to become a close associate of Klaus Briegleb, the tenured professor for modern German literature. I knew him from Munich and in my opinion, and not only mine, he was the foremost literary scholar in the country and at the peak of his art in his years in Hamburg. The constellation with my older colleagues was equally auspicious, an intellectual spiral nebula with enormous energy. It was also interesting in terms of group eroticism. As regards the university, from then on I knew it was not my kind of patch. I went back to Munich when my contract expired. Then the wild years of groups began: communes, psychotherapy, meditation groups, the New Left, the New Man. Topics like that were constantly bandied about. Back then, we believed in theory as if it had messianic power. The period between 1974 and 1980 was the experimental phase of my life. I had written my doctoral

dissertation, I had many options open to me, and the only thing I knew clearly was that I wouldn't go back to the university. If there is such a thing as suffering from doubt, I wasn't aware of it then. I felt inspired by having the freedom of several years ahead to find my feet without having to commit myself.

KLEIN: But that still doesn't explain why you decided to go to India.

SLOTERDIJK: The Indian trip had been a preordained choice in the spiritual curriculum of the West since the days of the blessed Hermann Hesse. You might have read Marx, Lenin and Marcuse, but the Orient was still missing. One day the time was ripe. It embodied everything that mattered back then, the therapeutic awakening, the spiritual awakening and the countercultural awakening. What is more, the whole enterprise was headlined by the topic of the day, 'free love', like a neon sign on Times Square. You would have had to be an idiot not to give it a try. Anyway, in India you met half of Frankfurt and half of Munich. I experienced my best Adorno colloquia on the fringes of the ashram in Poona. This was the start of an incredibly intensive period, because in India you just met people who were brave in their own fashion, aggressive, confrontational, and generous with feelings, observations and touching. The mood there today is largely defined by the need for safeguards, which was unknown back then. Of course, everybody was crazy at that time; you realize it when you look back soberly, but you have to admit they were brave to the point of excess. To go to India under the conditions at that time was really a big leap, a breach with the culture we came from.

KLEIN: Replaying old videos in which the eyes of Osho are looking at us, we can still feel the pulse of a dimension beyond European academia. How did this guru come to play such a major role at that time?

SLOTERDIJK: Nowadays he doesn't mean anything to me any more, aside from a rather remote feeling of gratitude. Remember, I was one of the people who returned from the East intending to stay here. I had changed, for sure, but I hadn't become Indianized. On the contrary, it was only since then that I consciously became a European. I have built the impulses from there discreetly into my life. They are only present now in an altered form, as elements of gentle vibrations.

KLEIN: Have you lived 'under a brighter sky' since then?

SLOTERDIJK: That's how I once expressed it. After I came back from India I developed my own private meteorology. I no longer felt personally affected by the weather forecast for Central Europe.

KLEIN: Can you explain how we get to the brighter sky in our

region? Are there directions for people beset by crises and looking for inner strength?

SLOTERDIJK: I don't want to embark on a discursive essay about the interconnection of individual and society, but it should be clear that the brightening up of feeling for the world is linked to a change in the mode of socialization. At the end of the Second World War, Arthur Koestler wrote a lucid essay, 'The Yogi and the Commissar', in which he typologically contrasted the two fundamental responses of the twentieth century to the misery of the world, the response of the yogi, who chooses the path inwards without asking about external conditions, and the response of the commissar who never tires of repeating the thesis that the social structures first have to be completely changed before we can think about emancipation of individuals. Towards the end of the 1970s the social revolutionary illusions of the decade collapsed, leaving a gap that offered fresh scope for the yogi option.

Most people don't remember that today. At the moment we are going through an era of commissars again, even if they are no longer the type of communist Koestler had in mind. Today's protagonists of social democracy are convinced that expanding the authority of the state is the cure for all of life's evils. The absolutism of the social sphere is seeping into the smallest cracks once again. The commissar's approach is not compatible with the classical Indian conception of the world. People in India tend to think that while each individual carries the potential for a revolution within himself or herself, it is a revolution in the first person. I returned from India to Europe with this lesson in my baggage without paying duty on it, and I have never completely renounced it. The ensuing conflict with the commissars was predictable. Overall, this happened in a rather weird way, perhaps partly because I didn't take the floor as a phenotypic yogi, turned away from the world, idealistic and esoteric, but as a person very much of this world yet with a different concept of the world. This contradiction has hung in the air, more or less unexplained, for around thirty years. Now and then, new commissars ganged up against some of my interventions – think of the strange failed debate two years ago about democratically redefining taxation in the spirit of giving. One way or another, that was an odd scene. A grand coalition of commissars bludgeoned an idea that obviously came from the yogi region. People still don't understand that there is more than one kind of progress, more than one revolution, more than one anthropology.

KLEIN: How does it affect you as a person when, aside from criticism, you also get a great deal of admiration? How do you cope with all the projections of your readers and fans?

SLOTERDIJK: Now I'm going to say something very odd: I often don't feel appreciation from outside. When it comes to applause, I'm afraid I am mentally blind. It hasn't escaped me that some readers value my work, just as it hasn't escaped me that attempts have been made to devalue it. I haven't been deaf to the applause but it doesn't distract me, and individual readers' opinions have only rarely touched me deeply.

KLEIN: That sounds very paradoxical. After all, at the same time you claim to react very sensitively to external stimuli.

SLOTERDIJK: Maybe I should explain that in more detail. I am talking about the public impact of books. You see, before a new work leaves my workshop I first have to accept it myself. At that moment I am my own audience, and I want to be convinced as such. My approval is not given for nothing. At the moment I hand over a piece of work I must have an idea of its place on the scale of values. If the author doesn't know that, who should? I don't believe in the cliché of the writer who produces work automatically or while sleepwalking, who creates works at his desk like a pure fool and only knows they are worth something when others react excitedly. Many artists nowadays adopt the camouflage of 'I don't know' games, acting as if the sophisticated public alone can pass judgement on a work of art. I think the self-evaluation of any author worthy of the name is usually just as accurate as the readers' verdict, and often better. Maybe a certain percentage should be deducted for the usual self-overestimation and then we would get a realistic value.

KLEIN: In other words, in cases where the inner power of judgement is sufficiently well developed, excessive self-overestimation wouldn't occur at all. Then one would not be overly surprised by other people's common judgement. But the ability to see beyond the narrow confines of one's own work seems to be an art not everybody is endowed with.

SLOTERDIJK: Let's say that publication means deciding whether something you have written passes the test. It presupposes an internal verdict about whether a construction has made the grade. You don't make a decision like that because you are so blindly narcissistic as to think everything of yours is magnificent. On the contrary, you are more likely to feel intense self-doubt. Only a little is allowed to pass through the barrier. If you conclude the work can remain as it is, the pre-censorship is complete. That doesn't exclude other people with other standards making other judgements. The author is only the person who says 'finished'. Anything else can be done by other people as well, but the author is the one who breaks off the work on a thing. An intimate sense of evidentness decides when the time is right.

KLEIN: Your fans and critics agree that your style is baroque and not infrequently brilliant. How far does clarity play a role in your conception of philosophical prose?

SLOTEDIJK: My judgement on this is biased. I believe my own writings are completely clear. I often work with abbreviations and exaggerations or, technically speaking, ellipses and hyperbole, two stylistic methods that are indisputably useful for working out ideas. Some colleagues accuse me of sprinkling metaphors too liberally, but I always respond that concepts and metaphors are not necessarily opposed, and metaphors often represent a higher state of concepts. There are, of course, theoreticians who were socialized in a different culture of rationality and have difficulty understanding associative language. They are accustomed to discussing whether a statement such as 'All bachelors are unmarried men' should be regarded as an analytical judgement. They are suspicious of my hopping and jumping and are inclined to cry 'thought poetry!' or 'metaphor-spouting!'

KLEIN: Do you mean 'live' thinking should rate higher than edited thinking because it is more difficult?

SLOTEDIJK: It is not necessarily more difficult, but rarer. 'Live' is a term from broadcasting technology that allows us to participate in events elsewhere. In general, we are not present when thinking is happening somewhere. And it is usually a long time since thought took place. With luck, it is recorded in writing and we can read it later.

KLEIN: The idea of reading something later raises an important question for me. I have the impression that some time ago you began the phase of reappraisal of your work as a whole, still hesitatingly, but we can recognize the beginnings. The section of your oeuvre published in book form so far represents less than half of your works. The present interview collection provides an initial, extremely selective indication of what you have produced along the way in the everyday business of *Zeitkritik*, critique of our times. In relation to the lectures and essays you have produced in the past twenty-five years, as far as I know there is no plan for a collected edition, which would involve a series of big volumes. From what I can see, the majority of your unknown works consists of your academic lectures, and only those who attended have an idea of them. Great treasures of live thinking are probably buried among them. What are you going to do with them?

SLOTEDIJK: For twenty years I gave lectures at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna on many topics without repeating them. The audiotapes of those lectures must be lying around in various private and university archives. Most of the public lectures in

Karlsruhe, and the seminars there, are also documented but not catalogued. Only one complete lecture, the final lecture of the cycle on classical Greek theatre in the auditorium of the state library in Karlsruhe, was published in 1999 by supposé. It is an interpretation of Sophoclean drama with the title *Ödipus oder Das zweite Orakel* [Oedipus or the Second Oracle]. That piece shows roughly what it was like when I could act freely in a live situation. Some time ago Auer Verlag issued an audio cassette with six recordings of lectures, but as far as I remember they were based on written scripts. There are probably around 1,500 hours of speech tapes in the archives. Regrettably, Suhrkamp Verlag couldn't decide to take on management of the documents. Meanwhile the Centre for Art and Media Technology in Karlsruhe has taken the first steps towards collecting and archiving the material. A considerable proportion of the documents has been digitized and listened to for indexing purposes with the aim of deciding, using selected key words, which pieces are suitable for transcription. I suspect most of them can simply be forgotten with no loss, but perhaps some things are worth producing. It seems this project could move forward in the next few years. Incidentally, in the period when I lectured in Vienna and Karlsruhe there was a loyal audience composed of people from the university and local residents in the city whose presence gave me the illusion of not talking entirely to the wind. Sadly, I have never been in the position of Meister Eckart when he claimed he was so full of God that he would have preached to the offertory box if there had been nobody to hear him. I was happy to have an audience and let their presence inspire me.

KLEIN: Let's not forget that the *Philosophische Quartett* is still available in the ZDF archives.<sup>3</sup>

SLOTERDIJK: According to my calculations, we produced sixty-three programmes in ten and a half years. My appearances in my own TV programme constitute a special category that has practically nothing to do with the rest of my work. In the *Quartets* I was always very reserved, aside from a few exceptions when I indulged in spinning yarns a little more freely. Usually I played the discreet moderator whose main concern is to offer the guests the

<sup>3</sup> *Das Philosophische Quartett* (*The Philosophical Quartet*) was a cultural talk show on German television hosted by philosophers Peter Sloterdijk and Rüdiger Safranski, who were joined for every edition by two different guests, usually prominent German intellectuals. Broadcast every two months on ZDF, the second German public TV channel, the show ran for ten years from 2002 to 2012.

best possible frame. You could call it the achievement of being lacklustre, which has its own attraction.

KLEIN: Let me briefly quote from Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*:

This descending to popular concepts is certainly very commendable, provided the ascent to the principles of pure reason has first taken place and has been carried through to complete satisfaction. That would mean that the doctrine of morals is first *grounded* on metaphysics and afterwards, when it has been firmly established, is provided with *access* by means of popularity.<sup>4</sup>

Could you identify with this statement in your work as a public intellectual?

SLOTERDIJK: I can't shake off the impression that Kant is expressing himself much more simply here than he really thought. He is pretending to believe philosophy is a result-based science that stops short of the last insights. They can naturally be popularized without difficulty. But that's not how things are. I assume that if philosophers knew something relevant with absolute certainty it would have seeped through by now. Since Kant, philosophers have had 200 years to reach agreement. But they disagree more than ever. The model of ex-cathedra popularization of metaphysically certified doctrines can't be applied to today's intellectual situation. Nobody knows any more what generally compelling 'fundamental metaphysical principles' might be. Theoreticians can't even agree whether the word 'fundamental' is a meaningful term. The whole business of 'making something fundamental' has become problematic. One gets the impression all the fundamental rule-makers are going round in circles. Incidentally, the symptomatic metaphorical mistake in the comment by Kant you just quoted shows that he couldn't decide himself in which area to look for the so-called principles. He says, first we should 'ascend' to them, and then, two lines later, we find the same principles have descended again to become the secure ground on which popular teaching should be 'firmly grounded'. The debate over 'grounding' ran dry some time ago. I think it was best summed up in the maxim attributed to Le Corbusier that the ground is the foundation of the basis.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1999, p. 63.

KLEIN: But then, what can a philosopher still share with the wider public?

SLOTERDIJK: I tend to regard philosophy not as a specialized subject but as the mode of working on a topic. Anybody who thinks *more philosophico* locates positive knowledge against the background of unknowing and in the context of general concerns. This creates an oscillation between affirmations and sceptical moments. If this is done over a lengthy period, when we share thoughts and ideas we can see for ourselves that we have much more unknowing in common than effective knowledge. Over time, the non-professional participants in such exercises can adopt this mode of thinking. In the process one learns how to be sure-footed on shaky ground. This kind of modal philosophical behaviour can go in many directions. In the future it can even touch a larger public, whereas it would be unrealistic to expect philosophy as an academic subject to emerge from its conclave again. Fortunately, there is a series of well-established disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, ethnology, psychology, systemics and, more recently, neurology and particularly cultural theory that, in terms of the logic of their objects, operate more or less close to philosophy, or could do so. Their actors know quite precisely what they can do and where the borders of their art lie. We can pick up on these findings. In the disciplines I have mentioned the archives are full of knowledge suitable for post-sceptical representation to the public. That is all I have been doing for a long time now.



# 1

## THE HALF-MOON MAN

*Interview with Elke Dauk\**

DAUK: Mr Sloterdijk, ten years ago the *Critique of Cynical Reason* seemed like a tremendously bold call. How do you explain that extraordinary impact?

SLOTERDIJK: The book was not a call – it was a performance. It celebrated what it discussed in its own pages. It was, and still is, a very cheerful book, unusually provocative in a context where one doesn't expect it. The critique lies in the tone. Considering its subject, it is astonishingly funny; it contains a kind of phenomenology of all the jokes that can ever be made about humans in the nine major fields of humour, which are spelled out in detail in the second volume.

Above all, it contributed to blasting open the conspiracy of disenchantment, the left-wing mawkishness in the year 1983. The *Critique of Cynical Reason* was the attempt to reconstruct the super-ego disaster of European culture in a phenomenologically broad study – a super-ego disaster that began with people having to live up to unattainably high ideals. Today we are living through the break-up of a process of constructing the super-ego that had already begun in antiquity. What Europeans experience today as a universal feeling of demoralization, right down to the tiny ramifications of political incorrectness that have such a deep influence on the zeitgeist, are

\* This interview between Peter Sloterdijk and Elke Dauk appeared under the title 'Der Halbmondmensch', in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* (29 September 1993, supplement): 2.

Elke Dauk's book about life forms in the Western world, *Der Griff nach den Sternen. Suche nach Lebensformen im Abendland*, was published in 1998 by Insel Verlag, a division of Suhrkamp Verlag.

remote effects of a process of idealization that took root with Greek philosophy and the later Christian doctrine of virtue and inexorably led to an unparalleled history of destruction.

DAUK: To what extent was the *Critique of Cynical Reason* a critique of the Enlightenment?

SLOTERDIJK: It is not a critique of the Enlightenment, but rather a continuation of the Enlightenment in a self-reflective stage. It is enlightenment about the Enlightenment. Reflections across borders that necessarily emerge in a first attempt are recognized at the second attempt and are already part of the picture by the third attempt. The third attempt is social education after the bad experiences society had made with its own naivety. We have still not learned the art of convincing humans to live together in large communities. It has become so questionable whether it can succeed at all, via the paths of classical idealism and conceptions of sacrifice first developed in antiquity, that we have to expect new attempts.

DAUK: Wasn't it also the attempt to create an opposing model to sublimate the destructive reason represented by kynicism and Diogenes?

SLOTERDIJK: It is not about sublating destructive elements. I focused on kynicism as a sort of existential revolt that had already become formulated in antiquity against the city and the state, that is, against the two major repressive forms, against the 'political monsters' of ancient times. Even today, people can use this model for guidance if they understand that humans must first be brought into life before the state can use them. Modern education, the modern Enlightenment and the modern state system have always assumed humans as given and don't consider how humans are born, how they engender themselves. In my opinion, ancient kynicism was an attempt, perhaps with inappropriate means, to defend a sphere in which humans are not delivered to the state too quickly, and don't become agents of big structures too quickly. The aim of kynicism was to recall a life form that was linked to the concept of self-assertion at that time, a life form in which human beings emerge first of all, and are not already exploited and given missions.

DAUK: Did you want to go beyond social theory towards an art of living or, more precisely, eroticism?

SLOTERDIJK: What I do is not only social theory; it is a philosophical-existential approach that per se observes the social world as a fragmented landscape of obsessions. The book is a manifesto of liberation; it is the continuation of a strand of German philosophy insofar as it was a philosophy of emancipation. It was probably most successful in Germany because it played language games in a new way on a sophisticated level of possibilities.

DAUK: Back then, using the example of the atom bomb, you characterized the subject as the pure will to annihilate himself and the world. Does this analysis still hold today?

SLOTEDIJK: In principle, yes. But the social parameters have shifted very considerably. Nowadays we no longer face the paranoid duel that pitted two exemplary political mega-centres against each other in the Cold War era. Today the issue is not so much to disarm two such subjects or to give information about them, although this is still relevant, but to reform them and inform them in such a way that they can live with their own magnitude, with their own potential for violence, and their own paranoia. This might sound paradoxical, but it is not about smashing up these great subjects but about helping them to function successfully. By 'successfully', I mean beyond self-destruction.

DAUK: Is the kynical-cynical impulse still the motive force of your thought?

SLOTEDIJK: Kynical-cynical impulses do not lead to thought; they lead to formal rejection of unreasonable demands. Forces that drive thought are not found on the level of kynical and cynical impulses because these impulses have something to do with defensive movements, defensive feelings. The cynical impulse is the feeling of rejection that powerful persons have when people demand that they humbly submit to morality or a norm. They feel too strong for that and become cynical. And the kynical impulse is the resistance produced by the vitality of 'poor suckers' when they are required to keep to norms that were created for others. In their own way, they are also too strong to let themselves be castrated by a sort of normativism that tries to co-opt them for a social game that nobody ever asked if they wanted to play. In both cases it is a sort of individualist *résistance* that operates on the borders of moralism, in the one case from above, in the other from below. There are records of this from various world cultures since the beginning of cities and empires. One can see that this kind of *résistance*, this rejection of the imperial ethos, from above as from below, has been known for around 2,500 years, and particularly in the West where there has always been special licence for speaking out defiantly, that is, where the truth oracle has functioned better, and even in a cheeky, immoral tone, than in China or other places, where the political pressure to gloss over and say the required things operates much more tightly. Returning to your question, for me, and I think for most philosophers, what drives thought lies at a deeper level. It is not resistance, but riddles, that make one think. Having a big 'No' inside you leads to therapy, at best. But if you have a riddle inside you, you arrive either at art

or philosophy. I see my work being located at the intersection of these fields.

DAUK: You have been interested in Gnosis in recent years. Whereas the kynic insists on a fulfilled life, the disciple of Gnosticism seeks flight from the world. Isn't this a path from 'life as risk' to 'life as mourning'?

SLOTERDIJK: Quite the contrary. I am much more optimistic now than I was in my book *Critique of Cynical Reason*, because that book only spoke the language of cheerful protest. You can declare war and you can declare a holiday, and that book declared a holiday. It did so intentionally and polemically against a society that had declared war and troubles. Today my eyes see other horizons and my thinking stems from a different centre that is more thoroughly worked out and differently informed about its reasons for cheerfulness. My reasons for cheerfulness go much deeper than those of the *Critique of Cynical Reason*. The result is that I no longer work on a theory of protest but on a fundamental theory of the absent person. That means I use anthropological arguments to develop the thesis that humans have turned away from the world to a large degree, and they always exist also in the mode of absence, in the mode of unknowing, in a nocturnal relation to the world. Consequently I see no reason, at least not in terms of anthropology, to continue the forcible co-option of individuals for the sake of a totality called 'reality'. That's what contemporary media do when they keep on agitating about troubles, showering people constantly with unpleasant news, inspired by a degree of informative sadism, as if to say, 'We have recorded this awful stuff to pass on and you are the right recipients.' Everybody tries to be the medium, not the filter. The filters and the end buyers are always the others. I think it's possible to show that people never have to be end buyers of misfortune. Their inherent nature makes them like half-moons, only half turned towards the world, and their other half belongs to a different principle that can't be reached by that agitation about troubles.

DAUK: Is the relationship between the ego and the world the basic theme of your work?

SLOTERDIJK: The relationship between humans and the world has been the theme of philosophy for 2,500 years, but classical metaphysics included a third element that gets a bad press today. However, the metaphysical triangle in which thought was practised via the major questions – the triangle consisting of God, man and the soul – still exists as a rump. Elsewhere it is replaced by a monist view of the world, that is, by positing the world as absolute, and treating human beings only as a function of the world, as a local function of the cosmos or a local function of society. This makes us slip back

into the bad old conditions because we urge each individual to live his or her life in a way that is symptomatic of a society that doubts its own existence. There are good reasons to reject this imposition. I am beginning to present a very different kind of anthropology, one that eliminates the automatic relation of man and the world. Humans don't belong to the world like your thumb to your hand. They also stand with their backs to the world – as children of the night or of vacant nothingness.

DAUK: Were you interested in Gnosticism because the Gnostics practised opposition to the agents of the material world?

SLOTERDIJK: I saw Gnosis as an exercise ground on which one can study the a-cosmic dimension, the components of the human psyche that are turned away from the world. It was an interdisciplinary project between the philosophy of religion and anthropology. The results are now available, first of all in a big collection of documents titled *World Revolution of the Soul*, a documentation of nearly a thousand pages that proves how people in the Western tradition have recorded their deregistration – if I can put it like that – at the residency registration office of the cosmos. Another result of the project is my forthcoming book, *Weltfremdheit* [World Estrangement]. This is not documentation – it is a discursively written account that develops the above-mentioned thesis in relation to music, sleep, drugs, religions, the death drive, self-awareness, meditative phenomena and many other things. The whole point is to show that we can't get any further with a primitive face-to-face relationship between 'man and the world'. It shows that we only describe a human being properly when we show that he or she lives at a sharp angle to reality and is sometimes here and sometimes not, and usually not.

DAUK: How is *Weltfremdheit* related to your thesis that hominization, humanization itself, is the disaster per se?

SLOTERDIJK: I don't say that on my own account; rather, I adopt a thesis that emerged around 2,000 years ago in the context of a dissident branch of Judaism during a self-critical phase of Jewish Genesis theology, and that people in our cultural sphere have never forgotten since then. The secret rumour says that there was a clumsy Creator and that this earth is not the best achievement of the world beyond, and certainly not optimal, and that the fundamental Catholic decision to save God by burdening man isn't the only meaningful possibility for distributing the burden in this context. We could also burden God and thus save the truth by regarding the Creation as second-best, maybe even as a botched effort, or one with a built-in tendency to fail. That is quite a different philosophical approach and it has created a breakthrough in anthropology

and made negative anthropology possible, that is, teachings about a person's absence from the world as a kind of theory of the night and of sleep, of absence. As soon as that is formulated in enough detail we shall see that it generally offers a better way to describe humans than positivist anthropologies do.

DAUK: Isn't the dark side of man only half the truth?

SLOTERDIJK: It is the forgotten half of the truth. What matters now is to continue thinking about the cognitive insights of anthropology in such a way that we remain within the continuum of Western learning processes and can still discuss and debate on an equal footing with a Taoist sage, an Indian sadhu and an ecstatic Hasid.