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Abstract

According to the criticisms of Slavoj Žižek and Alberto Toscano, Peter Sloterdijk's recent work contains an anti-egalitarian and anti-universalist discourse that is inherent to a Nietzschean concept of politics based on a hierarchy of affects instead of universal ideas. Although it is true that the clinical problem of *ressentiment* constitutes the ethical core of Sloterdijk's interest in 'psychopolitics', it implies much more than an instrument of interpreting radical politics as an irrationality or pathology. In fact, picking up the arrow first shot by Nietzsche and then by Deleuze, Sloterdijk's work is important and original precisely because it provides us with a clinical focus on the affective infrastructure of the present that does *not* facilitate the moral self-gratification of the democratic Right. His entire work should rather be read as an attempt to speak and act without *ressentiment* and in this way to explore the practical conditions of a politics that escapes from the alternative of liberal versus communist as it prevails in contemporary critical theory. This is demonstrated through a detailed study of Sloterdijk's development of, and political answers to, the problem of *ressentiment*, beginning with the *Critique of Cynical Reason* and continuing until the *Spheres*-trilogy and his recent essays on the temporal structure of rage and zealotry.

A Thymotic Left? Peter Sloterdijk and the Psychopolitics of *Ressentiment*

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As its subtitle makes clear, Peter Sloterdijk's *Rage and Time. A Psychopolitical Investigation* (2006) continues a line of research that begins with the *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), which already abounded with references to psychopolitics. Far from psychologising political powers, psychopolitics deals with the ecology and economy of energies or affects that are articulated only on a collective level. In this sense Sloterdijk is indebted to crowd psychologists such as Hermann Broch and Elias Canetti, to the mimetic anthropology of Gabriel Tarde and René Girard, as well as to media theorists such as Marshall McLuhan or Jean Baudrillard. But his primary inspiration is Nietzschean, insofar as psychopolitics is inseparable from 'a self-aware antipolitical therapeutics' which seeks 'not to depoliticize individuals, but to deneuroticize politics'¹ (TS 90) with regard to the basic affect constellation of the West: *ressentiment*.

Although I argue that the problem of *ressentiment* is central to Sloterdijk's general philosophical project, the strategies for its overcoming have shifted to such an extent that, at first sight, there appears an almost unbridgeable gap between his earlier and later works. This explains why Sloterdijk's early *Critique* was eagerly received by Left Wing critical theorists as antidote against the stagnation of revolutionary enthusiasm in post-war *Kritische Theorie*, whereas later works such as *Rage and Time* or *God's Zeal* (2007) are bound to disappoint those who expect Sloterdijk to be the next big thing in 'theory'. For instead of healing honourable *theoria* of its 'veil of conventions, lies, abstractions, and discretions' (CCR xxxviii), he now situates his work provocatively 'After Theory', insofar as critical theory always ever was a variety of 'the spirit that has been fuelled by ingenious *ressentiment* of submission to mere facts' (RT 228, 95). Worse still, he emphasizes that this also means 'After Politics'. In response, Slavoj Žižek and Alberto Toscano have already denounced Sloterdijk's recent books. Žižek wonders whether his 'obsessive-compulsive urge to find beneath solidarity the envy of the weak and thirst for revenge ... is sustained by a disavowed envy and *ressentiment* of its own,

¹ For an in-depth discussion of Sloterdijk's opposition of a 'generalized therapeutical care' (ST 217) to political claims to universality, see Bordeleau 2009.

the envy of the universal emancipatory position' (Žižek 2008, 165). And Toscano's judgment is no less severe: 'Sloterdijk belongs to those intellectual clinicians of our historical moment who think that we must both affirm the defeat of militant passions at the hands of a global capitalism and contend with the jaded apathy that allegedly characterized a completed liberalism, albeit one unsettled by the recidivism of religious zeal.' (Toscano 2010, 34-5) Must we therefore blame Sloterdijk for a variant of the cynical defeatism of the mourning left that he himself had wanted to cure in his debut?

Ressentiment Criticism and Beyond

According to Nietzsche, *ressentiment* is a 'feeling of vengefulness (*Rachegefühl*)'. It occurs when, due to some impotence, a 'reaction ceases to be acted in order to become something felt (*senti*)' (Deleuze 2006, 111). As interiorized reaction, it is the local and surreptitious illness that defines 'those who came off badly' in any healthy civilization, i.e. any culture based on a natural hierarchy between masters and slaves. 'While the noble man lives in trust and openness with himself (...), the man of *ressentiment* is neither upright nor naive nor honest and straightforward with himself. His soul *squints*; his spirit loves hiding places, secret paths and back doors, everything covert entices him as *his* world, *his* security, *his* refreshment; he understands how to keep silent, how not to forget, how to wait, how to be provisionally self-deprecating and humble. A race of such men of *ressentiment* is bound to become eventually cleverer than any noble race; it will also honor cleverness to a far greater degree: namely, as a condition of existence of the first importance' (*Genealogy of Morals*, henceforth 'GM', I §10). It is this timeless portrait of the man of *ressentiment* which Sloterdijk polemically reproduces in his evaluation of our contemporary capacity for critique in the *Critique of Cynical Reason*.

The problem with critical theory as it has developed in the course of the twentieth century, according to Sloterdijk, is that the discontents of civilization have grown to such an extent that reason is forced to dethrone itself, defeated by a new and indifferent 'realism' in which critique can no longer distinguish itself from the criticized. Already at the time of the first generation of the Frankfurt School, the only plausible standpoint of critique was a 'paralyzing *ressentiment*' to which Adorno referred as a sentimental

‘concernedness (*Betroffenheit*)’ and which Sloterdijk rephrases as ‘a priori pain’. (CCR xxxiii-v) The only thing that kept this ‘*ressentiment* criticism’² from becoming cynical was its self-annulling aversion from practical life and power. This changes with second generation *Kritische Theorie*, in which the demoralizing self-interest in the rat race of career critics prevails over the cultivation of a feeling of injustice. (CCR xxxv-vi) The real object of Sloterdijk’s diagnosis is therefore the pragmatic nihilism of a ‘pseudo-critique’ which has wilfully lost its innocence and compensates for its own bad conscience with an ever higher level of reflectivity or artfulness. Its point of view remains that of unhappy consciousness, but its *ressentiment* is now ‘reflexively buffered’ (CCR 5), such that, in the form of a cynical alliance of rationalism and *ressentiment* typical of ‘Christian-bourgeois-capitalist schizophrenias’ (CCR 107), it effectively perverts the imperative of *sapere aude*: ‘Only in the form of derision and renunciation do references to the ideals of a humane culture still seem bearable. Cynicism, as *enlightened false consciousness*, has become a hard-boiled, shadowy cleverness that has split courage off from itself, holds anything positive to be fraud, and is intent only on somehow getting through life.’³ (CCR 546)

Although Sloterdijk refers to neither, his diagnosis of critical conscience is very close to Deleuze’s diagnosis of Kantian critique as ‘exhausted in compromise’ (Deleuze 2006, 89) in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962) and to Deleuze and Guattari’s diagnosis of split subjectivity under capitalism in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), in which the authors had already demonstrated that ‘the age of bad conscience is also the age of pure cynicism’ (Deleuze & Guattari 2003, 247). The ‘pathological character’ of capitalist rationality, they argue, is not that it produces false consciousness, but rather that it constantly creates ressentimental complexes of desire and interest due to which we paradoxically come to desire our own impotence (lack amidst overabundance and stupidity amidst knowledge) as a condition of survival. More than any other social regime, capitalism thus cultivates *ressentiment* as a strategy of control, a tactic fostering

² Whilst staying at the petty level of mentality of Wilhelmine Germany, Scheler thus characterizes some leftist parliamentarians ‘whose criticism is absolute and uninhibited, precisely because they count on never being ministers.’ (Scheler 1972, 51)

³ In this sense, Žižek draws heavily on Sloterdijk’s early work and acknowledges that the disavowal of knowledge instead of false consciousness is today’s pervasive problem of cultural and social behaviour by quoting Octave Mannoni: ‘*Je sais bien, mais quand meme...*’ (e.g. Žižek 2001, 109).

of sad passions such as jealousy, hope, nostalgia and anxiety in people who, in the name of an exhaustive self-preservation that leaves all utopian critique in its wake, will renounce their own power and give in to ‘dirty little secrets’ and cowardice, turning their guilt inward and their hatred outward. Moreover, later German critical theory seems to have the same weight for Sloterdijk as freudomarxism for Deleuze and Guattari. Not only do both currents germinate in and around the revolution of 1968 only to dissolve in counterrevolution, they also both tend to organize *ressentiment* in the same priestly manner. According to Nietzsche, the priest derives his power over his herd from changing the outward direction (hatred of the weak towards the healthy) of its *ressentiment* inwardly (bad conscience) by means of moral psychologization (it is your own ‘sin’, ‘you are guilty of yourself’, GM III §15). Needless to say that capitalist pacification generates its oedipal losers in exactly the same way (‘if you were not successful on the market, don’t blame anyone but yourself’). Just as psychoanalysis, in practice, internalizes and spiritualizes *ressentiment* in the form of castration instead of overcoming it (Deleuze & Guattari 2003, 215), Sloterdijk observes that, instead of practicing what it preaches – i.e. the open encounter of a dialogue between equal subjects –, ideology critique has turned into a mere cynicism of power functioning as ‘polemical continuation of the miscarried dialogue by other means’ (CCR 15). It becomes professional and scientific as soon as it takes the form of a psychopathology that operates ‘behind’ the other’s consciousness, thus isolating the other in his a-political privacy: ‘Threatened by its own fatigue and undermined by the need for seriousness, it often remains content with having wrung involuntary *confessions* from its opponent. In fact, in time, the experienced eye will see “confessions” everywhere, and even when the hegemonic power shoots instead of negotiating, it will not be difficult to interpret bullets as the revelations of a fundamental weakness’ (CCR 17-8).

It follows that critique cannot limit itself to unmasking other people’s *ressentiment*, which could only lead to a pedantic ‘war of consciousnesses’ (CCR 18) and an increase of *ressentiment* instead of creating an opportunity for its dissolution. (RT 55; ET 169-70) Yet even if it shares Deleuze and Guattari’s materialist inspiration, Sloterdijk’s recipe for overcoming *ressentiment* couldn’t be more different. Instead of liberating desire by pushing the deterritorializing tendencies of capitalism ever further

towards the schizorevolutionary pole, he seeks a therapeutic strategy that reintegrates on an existential and embodied level our lived being in the world. (CCR 118-20) If consciousness is corrupted by a ‘schizoid realism’, then perhaps an ‘anti-schizoid realism’ (CCR 82) or ‘kynicism’ at the level of the animal body (*kynos* means dog) is still attainable. Hence the *Critique* pays tribute to the gay science of Diogenes of Sinope, that great anti-priest, who did not contradict idealism, but *lived* in defiance of it by publicly challenging moral bigotry and arrogance with intense sensuality and contemptuous sarcasm. For Sloterdijk, this sober but courageous and dignified life embodies the possibility of a reversal of values (VGN 46; TS 59) – tellingly, Diogenes was convicted for counterfeiting money, although he was never interested in power or wealth – at a moment when the long value constituting history of autonomous *ressentiment* had only just begun. For whereas *ressentiment* finds its legitimation in itself and therefore has an interest in cutting itself off, only the offensive and spectacular exposition of the naked truth could break free from cynical discretion and relieve critical consciousness of its melancholic murkiness. The whole of the *Critique* must therefore be read as the genealogical quest ‘in search of lost cheekiness (*Frechheit*)’, which, as the opposite of a ‘*ressentiment* that appears as method’ (ST 268; SV 134), is the affect necessary for saying what one lives and living what one says. In a time when private cynicism has become a mass phenomenon, it is not in the safe enclosure of academies but first of all in public parades of plebeian impudence that a reflectivity self-certain and self-sufficient enough for a total critique – a critique beyond *ressentiment*⁴ – can take place.

Thymotic Economy I: Contempt and Pride

The crucial lesson of what Sloterdijk has called ‘Nietzsche’s materialism’ is that enlightenment is always dramatic and performative. Reminiscent of Hannah Arendt’s concept of public life as a place where participation (action) and communication (speech)

⁴ Needless to say that one can still recognize this relief from ‘the slavery of self-preservation’ (ST 334, 47-8) in the final chord of Sloterdijk’s public letter from 1999 to Jürgen Habermas, whose ‘priestly’ (ST 63) demagogy or ‘dictatorship of moral virtue’ (Sloterdijk 1999) during the *Rules for the Human Park*-affair had exemplified in the most exact manner both the discrete gap between theory and practice of communicative action and its indiscernibility from the ‘stage direction of *ressentiment*’ (VGN 58) at large. See also Van Tuinen 2007.

coincide (Arendt 1958), the public sphere for Sloterdijk is precisely this situation in which ‘rational thought assimilates its own event-character in its reflections’ (TS xxv, translation modified). The problem of public culture today, however, is that it is based on a double bind: it couldn’t function without mass media, yet the latter have increasingly facilitated an intoxicating and self-deceptive proliferation *ressentiment*. As Arendt’s student Richard Sennett argues in his classic *The Fall of Public Man* (1974), a passive receiving of publicness has condemned isolated and disempowered citizens to an indifferent slave mentality and a loss of critical judgment, such that public man has been replaced by a character whom he does not hesitate to identify as the man of *ressentiment* (Sennett 1992, 277-87). At the same time, today’s citizens are brought up in a globalized winner-take-all-society that subjects its members to ruthless competition whilst imposing on them a taboo on revenge. ‘Modernity has invented the loser.’ (RT 40; Sloterdijk 2002) Private resignation and public spectacle converge upon an ‘event culture of *ressentiment*’ (VGN 58) that alternates between sentimentality and cruelty and fuels and commercially exploits private frustrations such as disgust about crime and envious identification with fame, wealth and glamour instead of increasing our capacities for public participation and open debate. With the explicitation of the project of a ‘generalized immunology’, the psychopolitical commitment of the *Spheres*-trilogy (1998, 1999, 2004) therefore lies in its proposal of a ‘critical theory of air and a positive notion of the atmospheric *res publica*’ (SII 353). *Ressentiment* is not only in the way we breathe, it *is* the air we breathe. Today’s silent majorities find and observe themselves exclusively in the *ressentiment* of ‘victimological collectives’ (WK 241) that restrict our relations to others to moral indignation, anti-elitism, vandalism, scapegoating, and a constant call for more security. (NHGS 156-6) The possibility of critique therefore depends on the very classical mission of the philosopher in society, namely ‘to prove that a subject can be an interrupter and not just a simple canal for the passage of thematic epidemics and waves of stress.’ (ST 85, 123, 262-3, 287; cf. CCR 310) Standing on the brink of the public sphere, the ‘thinker on stage’ is the ‘psychohygienical’ (GE 212-8), ‘biopolitical’ (GE 34-5) and ‘biosophic’ (SIII 25) pedagogue and physician of civilization, ‘from whom intelligence

learns how its passions arrive at the level of concepts' (SI 82) and thus how to immunize itself against the 'affective epidemics' and 'viral infections' (RT 205) of *ressentiment*.⁵

But isn't this assignment of the philosopher merely a nostalgic dream of nobility amidst the radical 'indifference' and literal 'mediocrity' of 'last man' (VM 69-95; RT 183-226)? In fact, any attempt to 'make a difference' and 'defy the mass in ourselves' (VM 95) automatically takes the form of a *Kulturkampf* over the legitimacy and genealogy of differences in general. (VM 84) On the one hand, Sloterdijk therefore interprets 'the open wounds of modernity' in the clinical terms of an 'algodicy' – how to give meaning to pain – that replaces that of the theodicy. (CCR 460-8; TS 76-7) He diagnoses a typically modern *ressentiment* (VM 56) whose 'egalitarian effect' is the principle of 'differentiated indifference' due to which the striving for the ideal of universal dignity blocks itself and terminates in contempt (no culture of authenticity can disguise that, in practice, equal respect is not high respect). (VM 87-8; ISB 39-43; NHGS 163) But on the other hand, as a true Nietzschean he prefers an alternative, more aristocratic kind of contempt, one that is not the reactive disdain for the strong by the weak, but an active affect capable of inducing new, more worthy possibilities of life, 'a corrective, empowering (*potenzierend*) contempt' (VM 56). This *Kulturkampf* is precisely what is at stake in *Rage and Time* and *God's Zeal*, of which the genealogical project again implies the question whether a different site of valuation than *ressentiment* can be developed.

The major premise of Sloterdijk's *Kulturkampf* is provided by an understanding of psychopolitics 'beyond eroticism' (RT 13) and based on a 'noble anthropology' (WF 25-47) as opposed to 'black anthropologies' (NHGS 149). As Sloterdijk suggests, the 'theistic dressages in humility' of Christian anthropology and anthropotechnics persist almost unbowedly in dismal human sciences such as economics and psychoanalysis. (SIII 762, 770) Whether the constitutive discrepancy lies between the finity of resources and the infinity of needs or between the pleasure principle and the reality principle, in each case the *conditio humana* as a whole is understood on the basis of the dynamic of the libido (the *homo oeconomicus*, Oedipus), and thus through an original and irreducible lack that must somehow be compensated and sublimated, if not repressed (the state, the

⁵ For a further development of Sloterdijk's media ecology, see Van Tuinen 2009b.

death drive). It is this morally legitimating *idée fixe* of humankind as *Mängelwesen*, which for Sloterdijk summarizes the whole morose analytics of finitude typical of modern anthropocentric discourse: ‘Whenever lack is in power, the “ethics of indignity” has the word.’ (RT 19; see NHGS 40-50)

By contrast, *Rage and Time* seeks to supplement libidinal economy with thymotic economy. Following Leo Strauss’ and Francis Fukuyama’s reading of Plato’s *Statesman*, *thymos*, as opposed to *eros*, is the receptive sense that makes the soul the bearer of self-affirmative affects. If the blind rage or wrath (*menis*) of the Homeric heroes seems so incomprehensible to us, this is because for us everything that stems from pride or dignity, such as generosity, revenge, or readiness to die in battle, most often is ‘only an empty entry in the dictionary of the neurotic.’ (RT 14) The Ancient Greeks, on the other hand, saw the world as a public stage on which to exteriorize their pride in ‘an appreciation of war without limitations’ (RT 3) that is inherently worth more than all the private suffering that may follow from it: ‘In the case of pure rage there is no complex inner life, no hidden psychic world, no private secret through which the hero would become understandable to other human beings. Rather, the basic principle is that the inner life of the actor should become wholly manifest and wholly public. It should become wholly deed and, if possible, wholly song.’ (RT 9) In other words, because the subject merges without leftover with the event (RT 8), being merely a ‘receptacle’ or ‘meeting point of affects or partial energies’ (RT 11) that take it ‘beside itself’, there is no innate principle that suffices for the development of *ressentiment*. As a consequence, thymotic economies, at least in their pure form, are not based on lack and calculation, but rather on affluence and extravagant dissipation, even on selfishly ambitious generosity. Moreover, egoism, self-esteem, vanity, *amour-propre* and ambition cannot be reduced to a narcissistic neurosis of the libido, because before they become egocentric they are always already socio-political affects par excellence. (RT 19-20) In fact, if life in the Greek *polis* is unthinkable without the proper management and domestication of thymotic energies (RT 12, 23-5), it couldn’t do without them. Whereas capitalist exploitation and hyperconsumerism have since long annexed the existing institutions of civil society, Sloterdijk therefore prophesies that the future of urban citizenship is feasible only as a ‘pride-ensemble’ (RT 19; NHGS 158-61) that ‘requests every individual to step out onto

the external stages of existence and expose his powers to prove himself before his peers.’ (RT 16)

Thus it is no longer through the affect of cheekiness, but through *thymos* or ‘stout-heartedness’ (*Beherztheit*, RT 12) that Sloterdijk explores modes of non-resentimental valuation: ‘While eroticism points to ways leading to those “objects” that we lack and whose presence or possession makes us feel complete, thymotics discloses ways for human beings to redeem what they possess, to learn what they are able to do, and to see what they want.’ (RT 15-6) This does not imply, however, that *ressentiment* grows from the erotic part of the soul. *Ressentiment* is neither the same as nor implies jealousy. On the contrary, *thymos* holds both the source of *ressentiment* and the possibility of its overcoming, whilst *eros*, and the eroticization of *thymos* in today’s ‘dynamic systems of greed’ (RT 196-203), merely amplifies its development. (RT 40) Initially, it is therefore not lack that generates *ressentiment*, but *ressentiment* that generates lack. What makes the notion of *ressentiment* politically relevant is precisely that, as a fixation of thymotic affects, it denotes an ‘exoneurosis’ (ST 84) and not just some private shortcoming. (NHGS 139)

Thymotic Economy II: Anger and Time

The basic therapeutical distinction of *Rage and Time* revolves around an ‘ill thymotics’ and a ‘healthy’ or ‘just’ thymotics and it is here that Sloterdijk draws the genealogical cesura, as Nietzsche did before him, between Ancient Greek civilization on the one hand and Judaic-Christian-modern civilization on the other. In the former, the immediate exercise of rage is the privilege of masters whilst slaves are burdened with *ressentiment*. In the latter, the slaves develop a new type of rage based on a postponed and imaginary revenge that seduces the masters to internalize their rage and become slaves as well. Although Sloterdijk refers to Bataille’s distinction between the general economy of dissipation and sacrifice and a restricted economy of accumulation, conservation and reinvestment, this distinction builds on an economical theory that was already implicitly present in Nietzsche’s *Genealogy*. It concerns two radically opposed ways of managing the economy of pride, or more precisely, ‘anger’ as the pre-eminent affect capable of

constituting political subjectivity. Whereas the Homeric hero expresses anger in immediate release and glorious sacrifice (RT 55-9), later Europeans tend to subject it to a process of 'sublimation, internalization, transference, and distortion.' (RT 86) This latter economy of latent and accumulative anger is the soil on which *ressentiment* grows and on which the strong and intimate connection between rage and time is established. (RT 59-62) Nietzsche had already defined the man of *ressentiment* by his incapacity to forget (GM II §1), as a consequence of which he interiorizes his traumatic past in the form of a postponed revenge. Sloterdijk interprets the history of the West in the same sense, insofar as it springs from 'the psychic and moral wound that does not heal and which creates its own corrupt temporality, the bad infinity of an unanswered complaint.' (RT 49)

However, the originality of *Rage and Time*, at least when compared to its precursor, is that it discovers a qualitative change in the restricted economy of anger during the past two centuries: 'Just like the monetary economy, the rage economy passes a critical marker once rage had advanced from local accumulation and selective explosion to the level of a systematic investment and cyclic increase.' (RT 64, 62-8) Once *ressentiment* becomes disconnected from the context of its origination and acquires an independent, even entrepreneurial dynamic, we go from the 'project form of anger' also known as 'revenge' to the 'bank form of revenge' better known as 'revolution'. A revolutionary movement or traditional leftist party, Sloterdijk perversely argues, functions as monopolistic 'collection point and agency of recycling and exploitation for investments' and thus partakes of an essentially capitalistic economy of anger that contradicts and undermines the very political economy it seeks to promote. Thus if Deleuze and Guattari had already demonstrated how today the cunning and inventiveness of capitalism is many times greater still than that of the priest when it comes to the cultivation of *ressentiment*, Sloterdijk adds that there also exists a capitalism of *ressentiment* itself. 'Your *ressentiment* is safe with us', the Party says, which professionally reinvests and grows of its capital, for it believes that by growing it is made better and that its time, or the time of a final and total mobilization in the name of a global revolution (*Weltrevolution*), will eventually come. Moreover, the phrase 'God is dead' for Sloterdijk means that history and politics have taken over the wrath of God. From a perspective situated after the twentieth century, the premodern economies of

inhibitive anger turn out to be preparations for the modern disinhibitions of the ‘terrifying force of the negative’. (RT 25-8) This also explains Sloterdijk’s shift from *ressentiment* to militant anger as basic affect: ‘The vast majority of the many millions standing in line at the entrance to the final tunnel do not show any symptoms of pre-suicidal morbidity, however, but rather those of a faux-religiously channeled build-up of anger.’ (GZ 158). This new ‘economy of *ressentiment*’ forms the starting point of an attempt ‘to continue the work that Nietzsche started and to put on the agenda a more fundamental reflection on the causes and effects of rage in modernity.’ (RT 289)

Yet if Sloterdijk seeks to go ‘beyond’ Nietzsche, this doesn’t lead him to a counter-ressentimental rehabilitation of Christianity. On the contrary, the ‘genealogy of militantism’ and ‘primary history of *ressentiment*’ begins with the ‘original accumulation’ of post-Babylonian hatred and revenge (RT 81, 86) as it is projected on the wrathful God of the Old Testament. The God of the New Testament is only nominally based on its opposite and internalizes hatred and revenge in the form of bad conscience. Just as for Nietzsche, all great religions partake in ‘a universal economy of cruelty’, Sloterdijk is particularly interested in the derivation of the wrath of God from his universal love, as ‘it is here that the dynamics of *ressentiment* responsible for the entire domain becomes especially evident’ (RT 103, 105). The two greatest contributors to the neurotization and confusion of civilization according to Sloterdijk are Saint Augustine and Saint Paul. To the first we owe the ‘sexual-pathological distortions’ hidden beneath an ideological ‘miserabilism’ and a metaphysics of predestination which, under the guise of divine love, establishes a ‘devious and systematic combination of a rational universalism of damnation and an unfathomable elitism of salvation.’ (GZ 61; NG 64-72, 88-100) But the heritage of the second is even worse. Nietzsche already distinguished Christ as the only true evangelist from Paul the dysangelist, when he held the former for a passive nihilist whose gentle nobility lay in teaching the reactive life how to die serenely, whilst the latter is a downright spiteful character, whose ‘cynicism’ led him to turn hatred into an instrument of universal love. For Nietzsche, in fact, Paul singularly impersonates the figure of the tyrannous priest, ‘the instinct of *ressentiment* here become genius’ (Anti-Christ, henceforth ‘AC’, 24), who reigns through sin (the transformation of the death of Christ from an individual gift into an initial collective debt/guilt) combined with the

undying hatred of a reactive life (the resurrection as interest and reinvestment that makes debt infinite, cf. Deleuze 2006, 153), initiating a long and terrible revenge that had to pass through all the stages of nihilism. In a similar vein, Sloterdijk retrospectively reads Paul as the archetype of the ‘messianic-expansionist’ zealot, whose blind love of God and belief in universal salvation is positively correlated to the devastating hatred and terrorism of God’s non-inflationary, ‘eternal punishments’ for those who have not yet been converted. Moreover, Paul stands out as proto-militant revolutionary, insofar as his ‘furious eschatology’ (RT 98) fundamentally changed the concept of time into an ‘in-between time’ or ‘time that remains’, a worldly time that already falls under the shadow of ‘the time that comes’: ‘Paul is probably the first who lived a hurried life out of principle’ (ET 282; GE 85-6, 53; RT 98-105).⁶ It is merely the irony of a dechristianized modernity that it has its own zealots of universal truth in the guise of communism: ‘the human-churchly fanaticism of the Jacobins’, ‘the militantism of Lenin’s professional revolutionaries’, ‘the fury of the Red Guard’s in Mao Zedong’s China’ each of which Sloterdijk sees as ‘feral imitations of the apostolic *modus vivendi*’. (GZ 66, 30) They all show the same apocalyptic cheerfulness – *Elendsübermut* (RT 48) or ‘connection between forced exhilaration and *ressentiment*’ (RT 117) – that is symptomatic of the manic drives of zealots and which can be summarized as ‘going on the offensive by fleeing from the world’ (GZ 60, 32; WF 104-17) or ‘self-preservation unto death’ (SV 16).

Thymotic Economy III: Generosity and Dignity

It is true that these reductive arguments on politics as a substitute for religion have been made many times, especially in the recent, ‘post-communist’ and ‘post-historical’ decennia. Is Sloterdijk therefore just another ‘liberal doctor’ (Toscano 2010, 41) for whom radical politics cannot but be an illness? In order to appreciate Sloterdijk’s (and

⁶ In his ‘obituary’ for modernity, *Eurotaoismus*, Sloterdijk had already argued that modernity is fundamentally Paulinian insofar as its eschatological or apostolic time structure is that of a burning fuse. (ET 277-93; NG 275-301; RT 65) However, the inspiration for this book was perhaps more Heideggerian than Nietzschean. In *What is Called Thinking?* (1951), Heidegger had reinterpreted Zarathustra’s formula of ‘rancor against time’ by which the will ‘imprisons’ itself as a spirit of revenge through which man as subject, and subsequently the history of metaphysics, neurotically mobilizes everything at hand in an exhaustive struggle against time and historicity itself.

Nietzsche's) originality, it is important to contrast his inquiry into the Pauline inspiration of militant universalists with another recent reading of Paul that couldn't be more politically and methodologically at odds with it. Whereas Badiou, in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (1997), aims at 'resurrecting' some of the driving spirit both of Paul and twentieth century revolutionaries such as Lenin and Mao in today's post-political time, Sloterdijk interprets the function of the 'manic-apocalyptic affective states' as instruments used by priests to stabilize the soul and the social integration of believers. Following Nietzsche, he holds Paul to be the bad doctor par excellence, whose immunological mistake has repercussions for the understanding of truth: 'Whereas the pragmatic mentality contents itself with the belief that whatever helps is true, zealous behaviour insists on the axiom that truth is only to be found in a belief system which is entitled to demand universal subordination.' (GZ 12) It is true that, as Badiou writes, '[i]f Nietzsche is so violent toward Paul, this is because he is his rival far more than his opponent', insofar as the former makes use of the same formally universalist themes as the latter: the self-declaration of character, the breaking of History in two, and the new man as the end of slavery. (Badiou 2003, 61) But the crucial point Sloterdijk makes is that the thymotic economies on which the aforementioned themes are based couldn't be more different. When Nietzsche dismisses Paul for being 'a rebel ... against everything privileged' (AC 43, 46, cited in Badiou 2006, 62) and disseminating 'the poison of the doctrine "equal rights"' (ibid.), this is not because he is defending the privileges of historical aristocracy that, as Sloterdijk puts it in *Über die Verbesserung der guten Nachricht. Nietzsches fünftes 'Evangelium'*, 'guarantee that *ressentiment* will always finds its ideal speech situation' (VGN 53), but on the contrary because, from a clinical point of view, true aristocracy is exclusively a 'position directed towards the future' (VGN 49). Whereas Paul gives us 'a narcotic, by means of which the present were living at the expense of the future' (GM Preface §6), Nietzsche seeks to escape from the restricted economy of gifts and poisons by making a 'noble present' (VGN 48, 30), i.e. a present – both in the temporal and economical sense – that cannot be reciprocated in terms of revenge or debt. His 'bestowing virtue' initiates a generous way of being, in which the taker on his part is activated by the gift to participate in the capacity of further opening up richer futures, thus raising the gift to the nth power. Nietzsche is thus 'the

first true sponsor' (VGN 48), standing 'at the beginning of a new moral chain of causality' and a new concept of time: 'the future of humanity is a test as to whether it is possible to redeem resentment as the first power of history... History divides into the time of debt-economy and that of generosity.' (VGN 50) In other words, whereas Paul teaches *Nächstenliebe* by *demanding* universal subjugation, Nietzsche '*pro-vokes*' a proud competition of glad tidings by teaching *Fernstenliebe* (RT 31) – a 'minor gospel' (VGN 33) for everyone and nobody that signals a 'grand politics' or a politics for a people to come. For it belongs to the nature of thymotic generosity that, instead of wanting to be alone, it aims at nothing less than a potlatch pluralism of gospels that is principally opposed to the monopoly of the Good or the True. (ST 35-7; VGN 52-3; NHGS 118)

If Sloterdijk positions his own writing 'after Nietzsche' and thus against Paul (or contemporary leftist radicalism), this means that what is at stake is the 'de-radicalization of alternatives' (GZ 112), which might well appear as trivial and counterrevolutionary, but simultaneously points towards the project of a 'civilizing learning towards an existence of all human beings characterized by the universally imposed necessity of sharing a single planet.'⁷ (GZ 145-6; ET 294-327) This single planet is not the external object of struggle between competing but monomaniac visionaries of general interest, since these can only spring from a 'resentiment against human freedom' (GZ 96), but the basis of our embeddedness in a world woven of a plurality of interests without common measure. If Sloterdijk's work is indeed an enlightened conservatist, this is because dignity and sovereignty are understood in ecological terms. They do not depend on timeless universal values presiding over life, but solely on the creation of new particular ways of living together. This explains Sloterdijk's rephrasing of his earlier Arendtian principle of natality in terms of generosity. This generosity is not the false generosity of emission rights that function as indulgence for the slavery to self-preservation in our daily energy waste, but the true generosity of artistic production (the avant-garde, VGN 49, 56; ST 37) or technological innovation ('homeotechnics', NG 227). Both are fields in which, under the right thymotic conditions, 'to waste is a gesture that generates dignity or *mana*' (ST 334), and in which true self-respect and self-

⁷ For a further development of this theme in terms of Sloterdijk's 'monogeism', see Van Tuinen 2009a.

affirmation cannot be abstracted from an active responsibility – *noblesse oblige* – for what one has created, i.e. a responsibility that is based on abundance and embedded in ‘ecologies of freedom’ (KMPA 102).

This ecological embedment of generosity signals the repugnancy of today’s ‘dissimulation of lack’ (*Mangelheuchelei*) in the West – economically a lack of money, juridically a lack of justice, energetically a lack of organic fuel, politically a lack of recognition, culturally a lack of tradition, etcetera. According to Sloterdijk, we even have a lack of lack, given the constant ‘import of grievances from the other side of the world’ (SIII 805). We have already seen how everything happens as if the modern emancipatory movements collapse under their own success, because citizens continue to experience themselves as handicapped subjects. This happens as soon as recognition becomes the object of an ‘imitative desire’ (Sloterdijk implicitly quotes Girard, RT 201) oriented upon already established values in relation to which we, as subjects in the process of emancipation, perceive an envious lack. Here we face the effects of a veritable metaphysics of poverty, in which lack as empirical condition has become a transcendental norm – Deleuze would speak of a *bêtise transcendente* – for its abolition.⁸ For even if on a material level, there is not poverty but abundance, ‘it suffices to subjectivize the notion of poverty in order to let its dimension grow to infinity’ (SIII 690; NHGS 90-1). The eroticization – meaning both obfuscation and modernization – of thymotic economy under capitalism into a subjective ‘need for recognition’ cannot but lead to vulgarization and depoliticization. The price of today’s post-historical and post-political ‘dispersion of rage’ is therefore an unlimited intensification of *ressentiment*. There has taken place a veritable perversion of recognition, in which pride is experienced only passively, as something that depends *on others*, whilst economy and morality converge in reflexes *against others* of naming, shaming, blaming and claiming. Politically this has resulted in populist claims to the carefree consumption of acquired rights and a new common sense based on typical right-wing issues of law and order, terrorism and

⁸ Elsewhere, Sloterdijk therefore contrasts Nietzsche’s ethics of generosity to Girard’s counter-ressentimental apologetism of Decalogue-religions, see Sloterdijk 2002, 251-2. Unsurprisingly, however, it is precisely this ‘pseudo-naturalism’ of lack that Toscano imposes on us in his Fukuyamean reproduction of Sloterdijk’s argument: ‘Isothymia, the passion for equality, is always simultaneously driven by ambitions for megalothymic [needing to be recognized as superior to others –svt] domination. It is also ontologically doomed, since in nature advantageous places are scarce Inequality is destiny.’ (Toscano 2010, 40)

migration. (NHGS 160) We have become mature (*mündig*), but not emancipated. Today we merely consume our own *ressentiment*, taking ever more care of ourselves through private insurance arrangements as if they were a compensation for life itself (ZWK 131), whilst ever more passively taking our responsibility towards the outside world.

Thymotic sovereignty, by contrast, is measured by the degree to which it resists religious, political and economical routines of compensation. Both natality and generosity are principles of an unconditional and asymmetric gift by means of which life breaks with the reactionary chain of retribution and escalation, from the Biblical *lex talionis* to contemporary terrorist exchange, and substitutes it with a 'looser chain' (VGN 51) or a transversal 'chain of unchaining' (ZWK 171). Nietzsche's glad tidings function as a medium in which such a healing can take place. What he called the 'innocence of becoming' is essentially 'the innocence of dissipation' and thus also 'the innocence of enrichment' necessary for the possibility of further dissipations. (VGN 51) The Christian '*ressentiment* of the self' (RT 16) continues in the 'smouldering *ressentiment* against property' (RT 33), insofar as '[t]he Left's economic mistakes were always at the same time its psychopolitical confessions' (RT 34). Only enrichment, Sloterdijk suggests, allows for a turn of capitalism against itself in which wealth is freed from feverish and secretive value accumulation and capable of a radical expenditure. This is how he seeks a return to the 'hetero-narcissistic' (VGN 68, 9, 43) expressionism of pride as it could be found with Ancient Greek heroes, whose expenditures were "'expressions" that were forces used for display' and promoted the 'self-communication and self-impartment (*Selbstmitteilung*) of the successful' (VGN 47-8, 66-9) as a surplus value.

Similarly, Nietzsche's unrestrained egoism and self-praise in *Ecce Homo* (Why I write such good books) is therefore not the indiscrete expression of some tormented libido, but an existential relation of speech to its own suffering in its tendency towards self-cancellation and to its own pleasure in its tendency towards self-prolongation. (WF 207-9) As immunitary act against the 'order of lies' and the 'metaphysically coded *ressentiment*' (VGN 28-31) that governs over all 'indirect eulogics' (VGN 9, 44), it constitutes an event that marks the beginning of an epoch in which 'the confession to one's own *modus vivendi* is the noblest speech act' (VGN 10). Of course, this characterization of a psychosomatically emancipated language simultaneously offers an

adequate description of Sloterdijk's own style, to the extent that when Sloterdijk speaks of Nietzsche, he speaks of himself and thus participates in, or 'resonates' (VGN 8; Giroux 2007) with, this new jubilatory and hyperbolic energy of speech. (NG 272-4) Since we cannot come into the world without coming into language, what is needed is a relief (*Freispruch*) of language that is at the same time a promise (*Versprechen*) of further capacities for speech. (ZWK 165-6) This relief was already noticeable in his appropriations of the evangelical *modus parlandi* for the purpose of 'ethnic investments' (DSG 46) in *Versprechen auf Deutsch* (1990), *Falls Europa Erwacht* (1994) or *Der starke Grund zusammen zu sein* (1998). It becomes more manifest still in his recent works, where he cynically (VGN 47, 68; SIII 681) explores wealth as 'source of ethos' (SIII 685) against the 'miserabilistic International' (SIII 680) that is founded on a discursive suppression of the truth of its own prosperity. Not only critical theorists, but all of us are burdened with a schizophrenic embarrassment of the riches, helplessly submerging in 'constant changes of mood of comfort and discomfort in our own well-being' (SIII 684-5; ZWK 131). Against the essential 'conservatism' (SIII 671) of our intellectual auto-immune reflexes, we should therefore ask whether 'it isn't typical for life in luxury that one is able to avoid the embarrassment of inquiring after one's origin?' (SIII 690) (Ex-)Posing such a question isn't just a matter of rhetoric or parody, let alone of arrogance, but an attempt to speak without *ressentiment*, or what comes down to the same, to speak without squinting and regain our belief in the world. *We are the front of luxury!*

Conclusion on the Use and Abuse of Ressentiment

We have seen how Sloterdijk's work shows a remarkable continuity in dealing with the central psychopolitical illness of *ressentiment*. From the beginning, its therapeutic strategy is committed to an ethics of dignity. It is based on immune strategies that are consistently phrased in the terms of 'a new critique of temperaments' (CCR xxxvii), a 'critique of pure humour' (SIII 671), or a 'Dionysian politology of passions' and 'ecology of pain and pleasure that precedes any of the usual politics' of 'combative and discursive interests along with their discourses, weapons, and institutions' (TS 76). In this sense, the

aim of the *Critique* is already the same as that of *Rage and Time*, namely a philosophical relief or retuning (*Umstimmung*, ST 16; SIII 850; NHGS 117, 151) of the sad passions that determine the *Zeitgeist* no less than critical intelligence. Against this Nietzschean background, therefore, there seems to be no basis on which Sloterdijk's early work can be said to have gradually turned into its opposite, even if it is true that, from the perspective of his later work, the *Critique* can be read as 'the last free *Waldlied* of the romanticism of emancipation' (ST 282).

Moreover, even if Sloterdijk departs from Nietzsche, by focusing more on anger instead of *ressentiment* and by relating dignity less to aristocracy than to meritocracy, these are not veritable breaks with Nietzsche, but precisely those retroactive interventions by which the genealogical method of the physician distinguishes itself from the historiography of the empirical scientist. Genealogy eternally returns to the hierarchy of noble and base. Unsurprisingly, it is this hierarchical scheme that forms the main stumbling block for Žižek and Toscano. The irony of their criticism is, however, that it comes precisely in that form which it seeks to denounce. Žižek's dialectical reversal that Sloterdijk does not acknowledge his own *ressentiment* – which Alberto Toscano judges to be 'duly' (Toscano 2010, 35n84), as it would unmask Sloterdijk's petty-conservative longing for some natural hierarchy – is therefore quite unconvincing. Firstly, it is astonishingly superficial, based on mistrust and insinuation that can only lead to shadowboxing (this becomes abundantly clear from Toscano's reading of Sloterdijk). Secondly, and more interestingly, it is based on a miscomprehension of the dramatic and perspectivist quality of genealogical distinctions, which concerns not the relativity of truth, but the truth of the relative. The value of a polemic, Nietzsche teaches us, lies not only in setting up an opposition, but depends on the affective relations that both positions entertain to this opposition, such that in fact we have two oppositions: to effectively discern the healthy from the sick is entirely different from blaming someone for being sick enough to distinguish the healthy from the sick. The latter case cannot but confirm the genealogist's intuition that whoever reverses the genealogical distinction becomes a prisoner of the opposition he simultaneously seeks to overcome.

The doubtful morality of such a dialectical reversal is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by Axel Honneth's recent attack on Sloterdijk: 'One may already have

suspected a *ressentiment* at the basis of this imitation of Nietzscheanism. But that it reveals itself in such a narrow-minded way as it does here just about knocks one for a loop.’ (Honneth 2009) The occasion for this disavowal of all dignity at the basis of Sloterdijk’s work by the German champion of the theory of the struggle for recognition was the former’s description of the welfare state as ‘kleptocracy’ (NHGS 97-105; SIII 804). In a short essay in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Sloterdijk had wondered why we constantly demand our tax systems to be made simpler and more just, but never question their reason of existence. What remains of civil society and the Left, if the welfare state is based on forced taxation? Wouldn’t it be ‘worthier and social-psychologically more productive’ if this money would come from voluntary gifts? Couldn’t this generate a more positive bond of interest between citizens and their communities? How did we become such docile and conformist, law-abiding subjects? Or as Deleuze and Guattari wonder: ‘How can people possibility reach the point of shouting: “More taxes! Less bread!”?’ (Deleuze & Guattari 2003, 29) It is here that a genealogical approach becomes indispensable and that a clinical focus on the affective infrastructure of contemporary democracies need not necessarily facilitate the moral self-gratification of the democratic Right, but could well provide the practical conditions for a liberating politics. For Honneth, however, Sloterdijk’s ‘trivial psychology’ is merely a variety of the idea that ‘moral resistance’ against injustice needs ‘an additional impetus from a feeling of *ressentiment*’, an idea which was in fact ‘from the beginning the intellectual spawn of a class struggle from above (*Klassenkampf von oben*).’ (Honneth 2009) Yet if we no longer ask such questions, then doesn’t this confirm that the ‘political philosophy’ taught in universities is by definition ‘*Après-Philosophie*’ (SD 82)?

In fact, *ressentiment* is a thorny issue that never fails to compromise the one who uses it as a moral reproach, since doing so automatically involves a certain blindness to its efficacy. (VM 56) Rather than judging over revolutionary politics by reducing it to some self-discrediting *ressentiment*, the relevance of this psychopolitical category therefore lies exclusively in the non-trivial fight against those who derive their power from its organization. For Nietzsche, this was the priest; for Deleuze and Guattari, it was the psychoanalyst; for Sloterdijk, it is the majority of critical theorists and journalists. Of course, each of these personae in turn is perfectly capable of wielding the concept of

ressentiment himself. But this is usually done in a trivial and moralizing way, as populist politicians nowadays do vis-à-vis the generation of '68, reducing it to something that can and must be repressed. Žižek is aware of this paradox and therefore prefers to rely on 'authentic *ressentiment*' (Žižek 2008, 159). But this is an implausible solution, since, as we have seen, although the man of *ressentiment* reveals his true essence to the healthy, he is incapable in principle of doing so to himself. In reality, the distinction between the perspectives of the healthy and the resentimental is radical and tragic. What counts is the integrity of our relations to our values and these can only be evaluated in practice.⁹ Philosophers should not be assessed by what they say but by what they do – including Peter Sloterdijk, a public philosopher par excellence.

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⁹ Tellingly, Toscano complains that, drawing exclusively from his 'books on the politics of fanaticism', 'Sloterdijk's politics ... remain heavily underdetermined.' (Toscano 2010, 35)

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Abbreviations used for Sloterdijk's books:

All books published with Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, except in the case of translations or when another publisher is mentioned.

CCR Sloterdijk, Peter, 1987, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, University of Minnesota Press, transl. by Michael Eldred and with a foreword by Andreas Huyssen.

TS Sloterdijk, Peter, 1990, *The Thinker on Stage. Nietzsche's Materialism*, transl. J. O. Daniel, University of Minnesota Press.

KMPA *Kopernikanische Mobilmachung und ptolmäische Abrüstung*, 1986, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

ZWK *Zur Welt kommen – Zur Sprache kommen. Frankfurter Vorlesungen*, 1988, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

ET *Eurotaoismus. Zur Kritik der politischen Kinetik*, 1989, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

WF *Weltfremdheit*, 1993, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

ISB *Im selben Boot. Versuch über die Hyperpolitik*, 1993, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

SV *Selbstversuch*, Ein Gespräch mit Carlos Oliveira, 1996, Hanser Verlag.

DSG *Der starke Grund zusammen zu sein. Erinnerungen an die Erfindung des Volkes*, 1998

SI *Sphären I – Blasen, Mikrosphärologie*, 1998, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

SII *Sphären II – Globen, Makrosphärologie*, 1999, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

SIII *Sphären III – Schäume, plurale Sphärologie*, 2004, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

VM Sloterdijk Peter, 2000, *Die Verachtung der Massen. Versuch über Kulturkämpfe in der modernen Gesellschaft*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

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GZ 2009, *God's Zeal. The Battle of the Three Monotheisms*, transl. Wieland Hoban, Cambridge, Malden (MA): Polity.

NHGS Sloterdijk, Peter (2010) *Die nehmende Hand und die gebende Seite. Beiträge zu einer Debatte über die demokratische Neubegründung von Steuern*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

SD 2010 *Scheintod im Denken. Von Philosophie und Wissenschaft als Übung*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.