

# Soft Power

Revista euro-americana de teoría e historia de la política y del derecho

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Volumen 10, número 1, enero-junio, 2023



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(Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer)  
1818  
Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840)

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# PETER SLOTERDIJK AND BRUNO LATOUR NOTES ON A “STAR FRIENDSHIP”\*

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show some theoretical points in which Sloterdijk and Latour influenced each other. Sections 1 and 2 are devoted to Latour’s influence on Sloterdijk, particularly in the formulation of the concept of anthropotechnics and in the attempt to overcome the nature/culture and subject/object dichotomies. Paragraph 3 is devoted to Sloterdijk’s critique of the concept of network and Latour’s response to this critique. Paragraphs 4 and 5 are dedicated to Sloterdijk’s influence on Latour: in particular, Latour’s use of the Sloterdijkian concept of “Globe” and Sloterdijk’s philosophy of the environment, interpreted by Latour as a philosophy of design.

## Keywords

Bruno Latour, Peter Sloterdijk, Ecology, Design, Anthropocene.

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## Introduction

An in-depth analysis of the scientific relations, mutual influences, and intellectual friendship that linked Bruno Latour and Peter Sloterdijk would require a systematic study of the entire corpus, as well as the biographies, of the two thinkers: in addition to having had close personal relations, they have – over the last three decades – often drawn on each other’s theories. To try to describe the relationship between Sloterdijk and Latour, it is perhaps simplest, then, at least as a preliminary step, to use a conceptual metaphor: that of “Star Friendship” formulated by Friedrich Nietzsche in the aphorism §279 of his *The Gay Science*:

We were friends and have become estranged. But this was right, and we do not want to conceal and obscure it from ourselves as if we had reason to feel ashamed. We are two ships each of which has its goal and course; our paths may cross and we may celebrate a feast together, as we did—and then the good ships rested so quietly in one harbor and one sunshine that it may have looked as if they had reached their goal and as if they had one goal. But then the almighty force of our tasks drove us apart again into different seas and sunny zones, and perhaps we shall never see each other again; perhaps we shall meet again but fail to recognize each other: our exposure to different seas and suns has changed us. That we have to become estranged is the law *above* us; by the same token we should also become more venerable for each other—and the memory of our former friendship more sacred. There is probably a tremendous but invisible stellar orbit in which our very different ways and goals may be *included* as small parts of this path; let us rise up to this thought. But our life is too short and our power of vision too small for us to be more than friends in the sense of this sublime possibility. —Let us then *believe* in our star friendship even if we should be compelled to be earth enemies. (Nietzsche, 1964, 225-226)

Although Sloterdijk and Latour never became “earth enemies” (Nietzsche, 1964, 226) – quite the contrary – the relationship between the two, the constant mutual references despite theoretical differences, and, last but not least, the readiness to accept both criticisms (Latour, 2009) and praise from the other<sup>1</sup>, were the hallmark of a long intellectual partnership.

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<sup>1</sup> Sloterdijk delivered the laudatio for Latour’s 2008 award of the Sigfried Unseld Preis, cf. Sloterdijk 2012, 75-87.

The aim of this contribution is not so much that – as mentioned at the beginning, only possible in a wide-ranging systematic study – of analysing in detail the relationships, both scientific and personal, between the two authors, but rather to offer an overview of them through a specific interpretative lens. Given that Latour's references to Sloterdijk and vice versa are scattered throughout many parts of the two thinkers' work, rather than a reconstructive work, I will privilege, in the following pages, an approach linked to a few concepts, highlighting the importance that Latour and Sloterdijk had for each other.

In §1 I will present Sloterdijk's concepts of anthropotechnics and highlight the role played by Latour in the formulation of it. §2 examines the book's chapter where Sloterdijk confronts Latour's theories more directly, contained in *Spheres III* (Sloterdijk, 2016, 193-230). Starting from this analysis, §3 highlights how the two concepts of "network" (Latour) and "sphere" (Sloterdijk) were used in the reciprocal dialogue between the two authors. The last two sections will reverse the perspective, offering a look at Sloterdijk's presence in Latour's work. Specifically, I will analyse how Sloterdijk's spherology is a privileged point of reference for Latour's "ecological" theories (§4) and how Latour uses Sloterdijk as a philosopher of design (§5) in order to criticise the equivalence between subjectivity and the body of the single (human) individual.

## **Latour in Sloterdijk I: Anthropotechnics and the Critique of Ontology<sup>2</sup>**

"No ethics works successfully for modern thought, as long as its logic and its ontology remain unclear." (Sloterdijk, 2017a, 148). This plea for a reform of ontology closes Sloterdijk's *The Domestication of Being and* represents one of the most relevant and, at the same time, least explored points of his reflection on the concept of anthropotechnics. To better understand it, I will show how this plea was influenced from Bruno Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern* (fr. 1991; en. 1993).

Before proceeding to such an analysis in detail, however, it seems useful to define Sloterdijk's anthropotechnics. Under this denomination, Sloterdijk defines first and foremost those techniques that have consistently been implemented, both non-programmatically (e.g., partner selection through aesthetic-cultural criteria) and planned (e.g., the history of pedagogical institutions) in human history by power systems, social structures, and human groups in general, to 'construct' certain types of subjects (Sloterdijk, 2017a,

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<sup>2</sup> This paragraph contains a reformulation of the arguments previously presented in Lucci 2011, 60-72.

126-127). In the essays *Rules for the Human Park* and *The Domestication of Being*, this anthropotechnics are defined as *primary*: based on *routines*, cultural conventions, and pedagogical-social programming. From these are differentiated that anthropotechnics that the evolution of genetic engineering is bringing closer and closer and that concern the programming of genetic traits at the prenatal level, defined by Sloterdijk as *secondary* (Sloterdijk 2017a, 126-127). The concept of anthropotechnics undergoes a turning point in Sloterdijk's 2009 volume *You must change your life* (*dt.* 2009; *en.* 2013): here, Sloterdijk, from the very first pages of the text, programmatically establishes an inseparable link between anthropotechnics and exercise, substantially modifying the concept of anthropotechnics developed previously. Athletically-oriented anthropotechnics, in fact, compared to primary anthropotechnics, introduces the possibility of the subject's action in what were previously considered to be cultural practices applied 'top-down' exclusively by institutional-intersubjective structures, and compared to secondary anthropotechnics, presents itself without any biotechnological aspect:

One can therefore not emphasize enough that the most effective forms of anthropotechnics in the world come from yesterday's world – and the genetic engineering praised or rejected loudly today, even if it becomes feasible and acceptable for humans on a larger scale, will long remain a mere anecdote compared to the magnitude of these phenomena. (Sloterdijk, 2013a, 78)

Returning to *The Domestication of Being*, Sloterdijk shows here, through reference to the eccentric figure of Gotthard Günther (Sloterdijk, 2017a, 136-138) – cybernetics scholar, science fiction writer, aviator as well as Arnold Gehlen's pupil and assistant – how classical metaphysics is based on a monovalent ontology (=Being is/non-Being is not) and a related bivalent logic (=true/false) that now appear inadequate to describe the multiple levels of complexity of reality. In this context, in addition to Günther, Sloterdijk's main reference is Latour: this is why an analysis of *We Have Never Been Modern* appears necessary to understand how Sloterdijk arrives at these considerations (which in *The Domestication of Being*, it must be remembered, are only hinted at, but not explored in depth).

Latour's text, notoriously, is an epistemological manifesto in favour of reintegrating into the binary logic characteristic of Western thought those realities that he calls "hybrids" or "quasi-objects" (Latour, 1993, 1-3; 51-55), which in his opinion, in the constitution of modern rational thought have been systematically excluded from an epistemological framework based on the subject-object dichotomy. Latour even goes

so far as to make the *modernity* itself coincide with the series of theoretical operations that led to this exclusion: 1) Continuous creation of *de facto* hybrids of Nature and Culture (forming what Latour calls “*networks*” and constituting the objective, material conditions upon which our society is founded); 2) Implementation of a series of epistemological procedures of *purifying hybrids* into ontologically separate realities belonging to the pole either of the human (=subject) or the non-human (=object); 3) Creation of the two ‘pure,’ ontologically substantiated domains of Nature and Culture, devoid of relations of mixture:

The human is not a constitutional pole to be opposed to that of the nonhuman. The two expressions ‘humans’ and ‘nonhumans’ are belated results that no longer suffice to designate the other dimension. The scale of value consists not in shifting the definition of the human along the horizontal line that connects the Object pole to the Subject pole, but in sliding it along the vertical dimension that defines the nonmodern world. [...] The expression ‘anthropomorphic’ considerably underestimates our humanity. We should be talking about morphism. Morphism is the place where technomorphisms, zoomorphisms, phusimorphisms, ideomorphisms, theomorphisms, sociomorphisms, psychomorphisms, all come together. Their alliances and their exchanges, taken together, are what define the *anthropos*. A weaver of morphisms – isn’t that enough of a definition? The closer the *anthropos* comes to this distribution, the more human it is. The farther away it moves, the more it takes on multiple forms in which its humanity quickly becomes indiscernible, even if its figures are those of the person, the individual or the self. By seeking to isolate its form from those it churns together, one does not defend humanism, one loses it. (Latour, 1993, 137)

With this incisive reflection, Latour calls for the courage to think of an ontology that no longer separates humans and non-humans. In *contrast to* Heidegger, Latour and Sloterdijk believe it is no longer possible to think starting from the ontological difference between Being and beings or divide material reality into stones, animals, and humans (Heidegger, 1995, 186-200). This is because we are, *ab ovo*, but in an increasingly pronounced manner with the advancement of technology, forced to think of concepts and beings that are entangled and inseparably linked to one another. In their description of hybrids, Latour and Sloterdijk carry out analyses that complement each other perfectly, as the following passage from Sloterdijk shows, which could be seen as the ideal continuation of the previous Latourian quotation:



Holding on to traditional conceptual classifications leads to the absolute inability to describe in an ontologically appropriate way ‘cultural phenomena’ such as tools, signs, artworks, laws, customs, books, machines, and all other artifices, because in constructs of this type the fundamental highcultural classifications of soul and thing, mind and matter, subject and object, freedom and mechanism, must miss the mark: all cultural objects, according to their constitution, are indeed hybrids with a spiritual ‘component’ and a material ‘component,’ and every attempt within the framework of a bivalent logic and a univalent ontology to say what they ‘really’ are inevitably ends in hopeless reductions and destructive abridgments. (Sloterdijk, 2017a, 137)

Sloterdijk and Latour hold the same position on these issues: the challenge of contemporary philosophical thought is no longer to analyse the *ontological difference* subsisting between Being and beings but to understand the *ontological plurality* they contribute to composing.

However, the challenge of interpreting, for example, entities such as the human being and the machine without postulating an ontological or axiological difference between them is, according to Sloterdijk, a theoretically and ethically difficult proposition for those who are not ready to abandon the classical concepts of subject and object:

It is clear that in these processes the traditionally interpreted personal subject no longer rediscovers anything to which it was accustomed — neither the side of the self, as it was presented in the moral traditions, nor the side of things, as one was familiar with them in dealing with them in the lifeworld and preparing them for scientific study. For this reason it appears to the subject that is bound to tradition as though it were confronted with an alarming case of anti-humanism: it seems to the subject as though in current biotechnology there were the sharpest opposition to the humanist and Olympian program of appropriating the world as a home for the human subject or the spirit/person and integrating its externality into the self. It now appears rather as though the self would be submerged without remainder into thingliness and externality and would be lost there. (Sloterdijk, 2017a, 140)

Thinking *after* the age of ontological monovalence is the task Sloterdijk and Latour take upon themselves. This task stands in contrast to the anti-technological catastrophist hysteria, which still starts from metaphysical dichotomies such human/machine,

science/philosophy, and Being/beings (for example Han, 2022). Once again, in theoretical consonance with the direction taken by Sloterdijk, a similar operation was proposed by Latour in the last chapter of his *We Have Never Been Modern*. Here, in a paragraph significantly entitled *The Parliament of Things* (Latour, 1993, 142-145), Latour propose to give political representation to non-human actors:

There are no more naked truths, but there are no more naked citizens, either. The mediators have the whole space to themselves. The Enlightenment has a dwelling-place at last. Natures are present, but with their representatives, scientists who speak in their name. Societies are present, but with the objects that have been serving as their ballast from time immemorial. Let one of the representatives talk, for instance, about the ozone hole, another represent the Monsanto chemical industry, a third the workers of the same chemical industry, another the voters of New Hampshire, a fifth the meteorology of the polar regions; let still another speak in the name of the State; what does it matter, so long as they are all talking about the same thing, about a quasi-object they have all created, the object-discourse-nature-society whose new properties astound us all and whose network extends from my refrigerator to the Antarctic by way of chemistry, law, the State, the economy, and satellites. The imbroglions and networks that had no place now have the whole place to themselves. They are the ones that have to be represented; it is around them that the Parliament of Things gathers henceforth. [...] We scarcely have much choice. If we do not change the common dwelling, we shall not absorb in it the other cultures that we can no longer dominate, and we shall be forever incapable of accommodating in it the environment that we can no longer control. Neither Nature nor the Others will become modern. It is up to us to change our ways of changing. (Latour, 1993, 144-145)

In congruence with Latour's proposal to establish a '*parliament of things*,' Sloterdijk sought to develop a series of concepts for a non-dichotomic metaphysics. The most representative one, together with that of anthropotechnics, is that of *homeotechnics*, that indicate those techniques that stand in continuity and not in rupture with nature, such as agriculture and breeding (Sloterdijk, 2017a, 133-148). This concept, unfortunately, will be practically abandoned by Sloterdijk (Lucci, 2021, 93-97), but it still testified of an underground dialogue between Sloterdijk and Latour that has decisively marked Sloterdijk's anthropotechnical reflection.

## Latour in Sloterdijk II: assemblages and foams

Sloterdijk directly analyses Latour's work in a crucial passage in the third volume of *Spheres*, placed at the end of the long introduction to the volume (Sloterdijk, 2016, 193-230). Sloterdijk has just recapitulated the transition from the second to the third volume of his trilogy through a history of the concept of *anima mundi* (Sloterdijk, 2016, 179-192), used to summarise the historical, epistemological, and psychological function of the concept of the Globe in the history of Western culture. With this concept, Sloterdijk defined the planet Earth as an "universal monad" (Sloterdijk, 2016, 60), i.e., a physical-geographical and conceptual totality. For a long period of (Western)<sup>3</sup> history, according to Sloterdijk, the anthropological, historical, scientific, ontological, and metaphysical horizon had been relatively stable: although constantly endangered by the irruption of various forms of otherness, these had been progressively integrated, in a more or less (physically and conceptually) violent manner, without however leading to radical changes in the existing ontological and epistemological status quo. A series of material and conceptual changes following what Sloterdijk calls "globalisations" – a plural term indicating a series of progressive relationships with otherness, that occurred following the geographical discoveries of the early modern age, which led to the deflagration of the single world image (= "The Globe") (Sloterdijk, 2013b, 9-10) – has led to the current fragmented situation, in which the singularity of the Globe of modernity is to be replaced by the plurality of the Foams of post-modernity (Sloterdijk, 2016, 60-61).

In this context Sloterdijk uses Latour as a conceptual support for the theses that will be expounded in the "programme" of the book, set out in the pages immediately following (Sloterdijk, 2016, 231-242). The question that Sloterdijk deals with in the passages about Latour's theory may seem at first glance to be of a definitional order – Sloterdijk is explaining the reasons for using the metaphor of foam and its value as a spatial concept – but it is, actually, of epistemological order. According to Sloterdijk, Latour is the author who, ever since his sociological investigations of "*laboratory life*" (Latour & Woolgar, 1986), has better understood how what in everyday language is defined as 'discovery' is, in reality, the result of a more complex process involving a series of human and non-human actors, of scientific and social protocols. These makes what is usually understood as 'discovery' definable in more correct terms as a 'product':

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<sup>3</sup> Sloterdijkian Eurocentrism has been noticed and criticised. Cf. among others Sunderland 2019.

In reality, the function of the discoverer is a far more active and complex one, as it is through their suppositions, observations, manipulations, descriptions, attempts and conclusions that the “matter” to be discovered takes the form in which its discoverability as an autonomous entity or a delimitable effect can intensify: The discoverer who is later acknowledged as such is, according to Latour (who refers to Whitehead’s *Process and Reality*) a manipulator and co-producer of “statements,” or rather “propositions,” from which the future discovery can emerge – not simply an ascertainment or finder of contextless facts. (Sloterdijk, 2016, 202-203)

The principles of what will become known as Actor-Network-Theory are used by Sloterdijk to explain the transition from macrospherology to plural spherology: the deflagration of the macrosphere, of the Globe, has to do with real changes, with ‘inventions’ and ‘discoveries,’ but these are never *ex-nihilo* events. They are rather the result of a series of actions, reactions, and relations between human and non-human, material and immaterial beings, which resemble much more a ‘migration’ into the social and epistemic realm of something that was previously, though present, excluded from it, than the creation of something that was previously relegated to non-existence:

Explication-conditioned innovations do, in fact, often make it seem as if aggressive new cohabitants had moved into the “house of Being” but found no suitable space available, causing them to take their lodgings by force. Small wonder that this has sometimes been described as “revolutionary” turbulence. There is, to recall one of the most dramatic developments, no doubt that the explication of writing through printing with movable type jumbled up the entire ecology of European civilization after 1500. One can even go so far as to describe the post-Gutenberg world as an attempt to incorporate the seemingly harmless new arrivals, which appeared in the typesetting workshops in the form of small pieces of lead, into a bearable cohabitation with the remaining cultural faces, especially people’s religious convictions. Proof through success came with modern literature and the school system of nation-states, and proof through failure came with the disastrous role of printing presses as carriers of nationalistic deformations of consciousness, as allies of all ideological perversions, and as disseminators and accelerators of collective hysterias. (Sloterdijk, 2016, 197)

Sloterdijk believes that having developed a heuristic model that allows one to escape the dichotomous alternative between ‘created’ and ‘discovered’ is Latour’s most significant

theoretical merit. However, Sloterdijk believes that Latour should be ‘tempered’ with Heidegger’s critic of technique. In his *Question Concerning Technology* (dt. 1954; en. 1977) Heidegger, while admitting that “Technology is a way of revealing” (Heidegger, 1977, 12), never ceases to warn that in the contemporary world, these unveiling risks becoming the only mode with which human beings relates to the non-humans. In this sense, Heidegger can be interpreted as a restraining force to the techno-enthusiasts, who believe that unveiling what is still concealed (=not known, not owned) is the great task of future humanity. Sloterdijk, on the contrary, believes that what is at stake for the future society is not so much the progressive ‘unveiling’ of all that is concealed but rather the maintenance of a certain balance between what is ‘brought into presence’ through a series of practices involving human and non-human actors, and what remains inappropriable: this is why Sloterdijk criticizes the contemporary era as the era of the “organized rupture of latency” (Sloterdijk, 2016, 210), i.e., the era in which something ‘new’ coincide with something either ‘invented’ or ‘discovered’.

## **Sloterdijk *contra* Latour? The (false) dichotomy between spheres and networks**

In the paragraph of *Spheres III* following the one analysed above, Sloterdijk critiques the concept of network, a critique that could be indirectly referred to Latour. According to Sloterdijk, the metaphor of the network flattens a series of relations that, in his opinion, are always located in very specific and material 3D-spaces, into a horizontality lacking authentic spatial concreteness:

The concept of co-isolation in foam can be used to redress the misleading effects of the strained metaphor of the network, of which too many authors expected too much usually without noticing that their talk of interconnection was borrowing from an incorrect picture and an overly reductive geometry: instead of emphasizing the independent spatiality of the communicators that are meant to be connected to one another, the image of the network suggests the notion of inextended points joined as intersections of lines – a universe for data fishers and anorexics. (Sloterdijk, 2016, 237)

Although Latour is not directly named in these pages, the critique of the network metaphor can also be applied to the Actor-Network-Theory. In this sense, it is evident

how, for Sloterdijk, as much as Latour was and remained a point of reference on an epistemological level, it must be supplemented with a more spatially concrete metaphorical horizon. For Sloterdijk, the question concerning the human being is always also a question concerning its 'where', and its conditions. Latour's willingness to engage in dialogue on this point, and to admit the limits of his network metaphor, was concretised by Latour in a public conference held on 17 February 2009 at the Harvard School of Design (with Sloterdijk present). Latour, after having opened his speech emphatically and unequivocally with the phrase "I was born a Sloterdijkian" (Latour, 2009), accepts Sloterdijk's criticism of the concept of network, claiming however, beyond the different metaphorical horizon, the commonality of intentions that led Sloterdijk to formulate the concept of 'sphere' and himself that of 'network':

Peter and I have proposed to introduce, each in our own way, two sets of concepts, one coming from spheres and the other from networks. And let me say at the beginning that I have to agree with Peter that what is usually called networks is an "anemic" conjunction of two intersecting lines that are even less plausible than the vast global space of no space that it pretends to replace. [...] Spheres and networks might not have much in common, but they have both been elaborated against the same sort of enemy: an ancient and constantly deeper apparent divide between nature and society. (Latour, 2009)

Spheres and networks, apart from the essential metaphorical differences, are two similar concepts, according to Latour, because they were coined to try to overcome the nature/society dichotomy (as well as the nature/culture dichotomy), which isn't in things themselves at all, but rather the result of a precise epistemological narrative (what Latour called 'modernity' in *We Have Never Been Modern*). For both Latour and Sloterdijk, space is not something in which subjects and objects act, but is an element that helps to constitute the different actors, that co-determines them, and that is inseparable from the very concept of 'action':

Is space what *inside which* reside objects and subjects? Or is space *one* of the many connections made by objects and subjects? In the first tradition, if you empty the space of all entities there is something left: space. In the second, since entities engender their space (or rather their spaces) as they trudge along, if you take the entities out, nothing is left, especially space. (Latour, 2009)

Under this commonality of intentions, it is possible to argue that the dichotomy between networks and spheres is only a dichotomy if one thinks of the net solely as an immaterial, virtual space, as ‘net’ in the sense of the internet. In contrast, it ceases to be so if one understands ‘net’ in the sense of *Actor-Network-Theory*. It is for this reason that Latour can, on the one hand, claim that “In the case of Peter and me, I hope it’s clear that we belong to the same side of the divide” (Latour 2009) and, on the other hand, devote a significant part of his theoretical attention to Sloterdijkian spherological thought when it comes to giving a spatial dimension to his critique of modernity as an era of epistemological separation between beings.

### **Sloterdijk in Latour I: the Globe as artefact**

It could at this point easily be understood, why the part of Sloterdijk’s production that Latour cites the most in his work is that which deals with spatial issues (with particular attention to the second and third volumes of *Spheres*): in this books Latour sees reflected the attempt to go beyond the dichotomies (nature/culture, nature/society, subject/object, human/non-human) that make it impossible to think of reality in a non-anthropocentric way, and which consequently make it impossible to think in a way that is up to the current ecological crisis. If even punctual quotations and references to the *Spheres* trilogy are scattered throughout much of Latour’s production dedicated to ecological themes, it is possible to argue that such quotations can be considered a *unicum*, as they all aim at the same goal: to explain through Sloterdijkian spatial analyses how concepts such as ‘globe,’ ‘global,’ etc. are anything but descriptive. Instead, they result from precise theoretical construction that have been structured over centuries and reflect equally precise political and metaphysical ideas (Latour ,2016). It is for this reason that in the present section, it will be considered, on an exemplary level, a single text by Latour – *The Anthropocene and the Destruction of the Image of the Globe* – as it presents in a particularly concise and argued manner the parts of Sloterdijkian special thought of most significant interest to Latour (Latour, 2017).

In a particularly incisive passage of the text, by concisely and poignantly summarising one of the cornerstones on which the entire *Spheres* trilogy is articulated, Latour clearly shows the reasons for his interest in Sloterdijk’s work:

Sloterdijk borrowed von Uexküll’s notion of *Umwelt* and extended it to all spheres, all enclosures, all the envelopes that agents have had to invent to differentiate

between their inside and their outside. To accept such an extension, one has to consider all the philosophical and scientific questions thus raised as being part of a very broad definition of *immunology*, viewed by Sloterdijk neither as a human science nor as a natural science but, rather, as the first *anthropocenic* discipline! Sloterdijk is a thinker who takes metaphors seriously and fully tests how well they measure up to reality – for hundreds of pages, if necessary. His immunological challenge is to detect how an entity, whatever it may be, protects itself from destruction by building a sort of well-controlled internal milieu that allows it to create a protective membrane around itself. [...] For Sloterdijk, the complete singularity of Western philosophy, science, theology, and politics lies in the fact that they have infused all the virtues into the figure of a Globe – with a capital G – without paying the slightest attention to the way in which that Globe might be built, tended, maintained, and inhabited. (Latour, 2017, 122-123)

Sloterdijk, as captured here in a masterly manner by Latour, drops ecology to the heart of philosophical anthropology itself, making the two disciplines indistinguishable. It is not possible, in fact, according to Sloterdijk, to think of a subject separately from the spherological conditions (i.e., ‘environmental’ in a broad sense: physical, symbolic, cultural, material, etc.) that make it possible, and these are an integral part of subjectivity. Abstracting subjects from their spherical environments and, conversely, abstracting these environments from what makes them what they are (i.e., both their ‘inhabitants’ and the theoretical and symbolic constructions that constitute their form) leads to untenable theoretical, ethical and political short-circuits: it is the possibility of drawing such conclusions from Sloterdijk’s spatial analyses that interest Latour.

In this sense, according to Latour, Sloterdijk’s philosophical greatness consisted in showing – mainly in the second volume of *Spheres* – how the Globe, that is, the ontological-metaphysical unity that functioned as the image-guide of Western Modernity, only existed as a construct: Metaphysical, theological, and ontological conceptions, but also works of art, literature, geographical expeditions, and political interests, have allowed it not only to become the unique self-representative image of the West but even to end up representing Nature in its entirety.

If Nature is the result of ‘technical’, theoretical-practical design operations, it is then possible to translate the problematic of creating images of the world back into ‘design’ terms. And it is exactly as a philosopher of design that Sloterdijk, once again, will be the focus of Latour’s interest.



## Sloterdijk in Latour II: Design as *Dasein*

“Peter Sloterdijk is *the* philosopher of design” (Latour, 2011, 159). This sentence emblematically indicates how Latour, in his small treatise on design philosophy entitled *A cautious Prometheus*, places Sloterdijk, once again, in a central position for his analyses. Latour intends to show how a philosophy that places design at its centre can only take the form of a theory of action. Design aims to have an impact on reality, to modify things. But *how* it modifies things has nothing to do with a sort of divine *creatio ex nihilo*, or with a radical change of the existing, which brings into presence something that did not exist before. This is why, according to Latour, the first trait that defines design philosophy as a theory of action is its “post-Promethean” dimension (Latour, 2011, 153). To this ‘humble’ dimension proper to the design mode of action Latour adds four other characteristics: Concentration on details (which contrasts with the Promethean dream of an action that definitively breaks with all the past), lending itself to symbolic elaboration (artefacts need interpretation), elaborating materials and situations that are always already present (renouncing *ex-nihilo* creation) and always implying an ethical dimension (the production and design of artefacts always also implies the question of their accessibility, usefulness, usability, etc.).

This ethical dimension intrinsic to design practices allows Latour to call Sloterdijk into question. If design ethics is modal – that is, it applies to the different and singular ways in which artefacts are designed and produced – Sloterdijk can be considered its champion. Sloterdijk conceives the human being-in-the-world – which Latour defines in Heideggerian terms as *Dasein* – always in conjunction with the modes of such being:

To try to philosophise about what it is to be “thrown into the world” without defining more precisely, more literally (Sloterdijk is first of all a literalist in his use of metaphors) the sort of envelopes into which humans are thrown, would be like trying to kick a cosmonaut into outer space without a spacesuit. Naked humans are as rare as naked cosmonauts. To define humans is to define the envelopes, the life support systems, the Umwelt that make it possible for them to breathe. (Latour, 2011, 158)

In this idea of subjectivity extended to one’s environment, Latour finds the ethical dimension of Sloterdijk’s philosophy of design, and in parallel, of his philosophy *tout court*.

By ‘non-human beings’ is to understand not only living beings such as animals and plants, but also environments, atmospheres, and everything that Latour claims have

always been conceived as 'mere materiality' (Latour, 2011, 160). If one thinks of the subject beyond his/her immediate bodily boundaries, one must extend the boundaries of ethical behaviour to include non-human beings. It is in this sense that Latour reinterprets in Sloterdijk's favour the controversy the latter had with Jürgen Habermas in 1999 following the publication of *Rules for the Human Park*:

It is somewhat understandable that when Sloterdijk raised the question of how humans could be "designed", that is, artificially nurtured, this invokes the old phantasm of eugenic manipulations. But the similarities between these two projects prove to be completely superficial when submitted to a close examination. They are similar only in the same way that two trains can both be moving ahead even though they are at an intersection that will lead them toward completely different destinations. Habermas missed the switch, the bifurcation that is so important for us to locate. Yes humans have to be artificially made and remade, but everything depends on what you mean by artificial and even more deeply by what you mean by "making". We have returned to Prometheus and to the question of Creation. Are we able to be the God of intelligent design? This is the heart of the matter. This is why it is so important to talk of design and not of construction, creation or of fabrication. To design something as I indicated earlier, allows us to raise not only the semiotic question of meaning but also the normative question of good and bad design. (Latour, 2011, 160-161)

According to Latour, when Habermas attacked Sloterdijk in the late 1990s for his text on the human park, he embodied a way of seeing ethics that was still tied to an idea of the subject to be understood as a human being endowed with a body whose boundaries are delimited by his skin. Sloterdijk contrasted Habermas's humanistic ethics with his discourse on anthropotechnics, which, if one continues Latour's reasoning beyond the letter of the text, should be understood as a form of a spherological ethics. To speak of anthropotechnics, for Latour's Sloterdijk, is to speak, once again, of the non-human conditions that make the human possible. Artifacts, how collectives direct pedagogical, aesthetic, and political practices are forms in which the spherological design of the human is given, which require their own ethics. This ethics cannot be the anthropocentric ethics of classical humanism because it must be confronted with the fact that the human is at least also the object of a design, as well as being one of its subjects.

## Conclusions

The path just taken shows how the dialogue between Sloterdijk and Latour is developed along parallel axes. On the one hand, when Sloterdijk confronts Latour, he appreciates and uses his epistemological critique of dichotomies such as human/non-human and nature/culture. This utilisation of Latour finds concrete expression in the two texts that Sloterdijk dedicated to anthropotechnics in 2001, *Rules for the Human Park* and *The Domestication of Beings*, where it is evident how his critique of monovalent ontology and bivalent logic uses Latour's texts (among others) as a theoretical pivot in order to demonstrate that 'pure' subjects and objects do not exist. On the other hand, Latour uses Sloterdijk's theories for similar purposes: for Latour, the most interesting point in Sloterdijk's work is the fact that Sloterdijk theorises an anthropology that goes beyond the human as a subject limited by his bodily boundaries, and includes the environmental dimension. It is in this sense that for Latour Sloterdijk becomes "*the philosopher of design*" (Latour, 2011, 159): if 'design' means thinking about a creative process that also involves the human being, then Sloterdijk is the thinker who, in contemporary times, has contributed the most to developing a philosophical-anthropological vocabulary that helps to extend the boundaries of *anthropos* to its environments and conditions of existence. In this sense, it is possible to conclude this paper by attributing characters of reversibility to Latour's statement, "I was born a Sloterdijkian" (Latour, 2009). If this sentence, in fact, in the light of the considerations above on Sloterdijk's relevance for Latour is true, the specular one can also be considered as such: it is possible to imagine a Sloterdijk who, by virtue of that "stellar friendship" mentioned in the opening and interrupted by Latour's death in 2023, could claim: "I was born a Latourian".

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