

# On your bike

Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life*, Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden MA, 2013. 503 pp., £35.00 hb., 978 0 74564 921 4.

Peter Sloterdijk, *The Art of Philosophy*, Columbia University Press, New York and Chichester, 2012. 146 pp., £41.50 hb., £13.95 pb., 978 0 23115 870 1 hb., 978 0 23115 871 8 pb.

With the advent of the global financial crisis in 2008, we would perhaps have imagined that the entire panoply of boosterish rhetoric that subtended it – from aspirational market-oriented self-help guides to outdated theories of rational economic agents – would have vanished overnight, condemned to languish in pools of Marxist tears (of laughter). Of course, while the market may have crashed, the general worry – ‘what next?’ – was left hanging, leaving the response – despite the Arab Spring, despite Occupy, despite mass opposition in the form of global riots and protests – primarily up to an increasingly vicious ruling class to decide. But Sloterdijk – with his whirlwind approach to the history of ideas primarily seen through the prism of complicated relations to Heidegger, Nietzsche and a oft-repeated desire not to be seen as the new Oswald Spengler – has much bigger things on his mind. His thesis in these two recently translated tomes is that no religions exist, only ‘misunderstood spiritual regimens’, that any and all revolutionary responses to the world are doomed to catastrophe because they attempt that which is impossible, and that the only hope lies in understanding that the human sphere consists of three ‘immune systems’: the ‘biological’, the ‘socio-immunological’ (legal, military solutions), and the ‘symbolic or psycho-immunological’ (mental armour). According to Sloterdijk, what human beings do across these different spheres is, above all, *practise*, in order to ‘optimize their cosmic and immunological status in the face of vague risks of living and acute certainties of death’; a kind of spiritual self-calming across the ages in different formats and with different names, but essentially the same kinds of rituals to which the mystificatory term ‘religion’ has usually been applied.

Sloterdijk’s earlier interventions into debates around eugenics and more recently the welfare state (where Sloterdijk called for tax to be abolished in the name of gifts from the rich) saw him much criticized by Habermas and others (see Andrew Fisher’s account in *RP* 99), and he is clear that he is not now as interested in what gene therapy and other cutting-edge techniques might permit humanity to do to

itself, but rather wants to trace the history of earlier forms of activity relating to self-transformation. Sloterdijk refers to his approach and method, here and previously, as ‘anthropotechnics’, a way of understanding what the ‘practising animal’ does when it does something to itself, and sometimes when it lets something be done to it. (There’s an interesting excursus regarding anaesthetic in *You Must Change Your Life* which highlights the historical significance of this technique, described as a ‘revolution’.) Sloterdijk is at his most insightful when performing a series of short readings of those earlier thinkers who tackled the question of practice and related concepts such as habit, exercise, repetition – among whom Rilke (after whose poem ‘Archaic Torso of Apollo’ the larger book is named), Nietzsche, Unthan (an armless violin virtuoso after whom Sloterdijk names a branch of thought, in explicit opposition to the culture of political correctness as ‘cripple anthropology’), Kafka, Cioran, Wittgenstein, Bourdieu – seeing in this literary–philosophical–poetic–sociological lineage a host of useful precursors to his own project. From Rilke he takes the idea of the metanoetic imperative – that you must change your life (and Sloterdijk is keen to make clear his anti-Marxist credentials by asserting that the emphasis is on ‘your’ and not on ‘life’: the point is not to change ‘it’ but ‘you’); from Nietzsche the discovery of ascetic cultures as the key insight for anthropotechnics; from Unthan the idea of an anthropology of defiance tied to virtuosity and the will; from Kafka a ‘negative theory of training’; from Cioran the practice of rejecting every goal-directed way of practising; and from Wittgenstein the concept of culture as a ‘monastic rule’, and the idea of ‘secession’, a term in heavy use in the two books, by which Sloterdijk means a series of ways of turning away from or distancing oneself from life. Bourdieu’s descriptions of habit, though criticized for their sociological framework, are also evidence for Sloterdijk of the attention paid to questions of practice and repetition in twentieth-century thought. L. Ron Hubbard’s scientology gets an amusing discussion as one side of the twentieth-century tendency towards the ‘explosion of informal mysticism’ (the



other being the resurrection and domination of athleticism and the Olympics). You might be wondering if women have anything to do with theorizing practice, or indeed, heaven forbid, *actually* practising, at any point in human history. Sloterdijk is not likely to help you out here. Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt get brief mentions, and there's a short passage on European witch-hunts and midwifery. You get the feeling that all this distance, trainers and asceticism is just not something women ought to engage in, and as for children, well, the pram in the conceptual hallway would just be in the way of the 'special zone of theory', the aim of 'secession' whereby one can stand on the shore and step out of life in order to look at it dispassionately.

Much of *You Must Change Your Life* is given over to a grand synthetic conceptual history of the practical aspects of various 'religions', Eastern and Western, and the concept of the teacher, or rather, trainer, that features as part of these practices. Sloterdijk's main argument here concerns the idea of 'vertical tension' – an image he plays with throughout with reference to acrobats and tightrope walkers, perhaps moving from the idea of a human zoo to that of a human circus. Against images of equality, Sloterdijk, like other conservative thinkers throughout history, such as Edmund Burke, is keen to stress the inevitability and necessity (as he sees it) of hierarchies and asymmetries. He writes of the tendencies in cultural life to form 'internal multi-storey structures', as opposed to the analysis that depicts a 'heavy-handed' 'matrix of power and subjugation' that Sloterdijk sees in the work of Foucault and his followers.

In a bid to shore up this idea of a kind of permanent and productive hierarchy in all cultural realms, as well as in the physical and psychic order, Sloterdijk describes the possibility that 'the inequality between humans might be due to their asceticisms, their different stances towards the challenges of the practising life'. In this way he avoids any kind of natural division, but this idea of unequal practices – an idea he claims 'has never been formulated in the history of investigations into the ultimate causes of difference between humans' – does not seem to get us much further as an explanation or as a solution to humanity's problems: where do these 'different stances' come from? How possible is it for people to develop different ways of 'practising life' if the burdens placed upon them by financial need require them to spend most of their time working, say, or taking care of others? If Sloterdijk comes across as defending the kind of life that we might associate with an elite, educated class who have time for contemplation and self-improvement, this appears to be no accident given that he wants to celebrate the 'third option' between 'death and the common lot', as he puts it at the end of *The Art of Philosophy*, that serves as a companion piece to the longer work.

At the heart of Sloterdijk's philosophical self-help project is an unexamined set of assumptions about the kind of 'self' who can carry out such 'operations' on their own lives. Apart from the material constraints identified above, the question remains of the quality of this 'self' that can split oneself into two, take a step back, and then get to work on beginning new practices; a 'self' that remains remarkably under-historicized. While we may imagine that it is possible to give up bad habits, and take up new better ones, it's not clear that we need to understand the entire history of anthropotechnics in order to do so, and Sloterdijk is of course wary of filling out any detailed conceptual prescriptions to lead people out of 'dullness, dejection and obsession' (seemingly a lot worse for Sloterdijk than exploitation, dispossession and war). But aren't we surrounded by people telling us to 'help ourselves'? Never, you might think, have the ideological and hypocritical dimensions of the rhetoric of 'hard-working families', 'shirkers', 'the workshy', and so on, been more blatant and more contestable, for all their ubiquity. Sloterdijk's diagnosis and solution, for all his intricate, sweeping style and historical breadth, will, be familiar to anyone who has had to suffer the blunt moral imperatives of Thatcherism over the past thirty years: pull your socks up.

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