

Book Review

**Sloterdijk, Peter,
*Der Staat streifte seine Samthandschuhe
ab. Ausgewählte Gespräche und Beiträge
2020–2021*¹**

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Despite it feeling eerie to speak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the past tense, we are now able to mull over what transpired specifically the first two years, how we, both as individuals and states alike, reacted to the pandemic's development. It is on this point that the current book under review comes into the picture. Translated into English as *The State Removed its Velvet Gloves*, the 15 selected talks and interviews of Peter Sloterdijk given in 2020–2021, which comprise this book, probe the unmasking or, better put, ungloving of the contemporary state's gentleness, evident in its stringent hold considered as pandemic measures. All chapters bar four (two for both English and French) originally appear in German, yet I provide their titles' translation: (1) The Western system turns out to be equally authoritarian as the Chinese. An interview with Christophe Ono-dit-Biot; (2) There is no place left for exaggerations. An interview with Adam Soboczynski; (3) Co-munism in the age of pandemics and climate change. An interview with Nathan Gardels; (4) Humans are not ready to protect nature. An interview with Neil King und Gabriel Borrud (3 and 4 being the only works to have originally appeared in English); (5) The human person, the distance-being; (6) The state shows its stern fist. An interview with Tomasz Kurianowicz; (7) Please explain to us the time in which we live! An interview with Willem Allexander Tell; (8) Is it legitimate to not fear Corona? An interview with Willem Allexander Tell; (9) Are we living beyond our means? An interview with Willem Allexander Tell; (10) Humor, a civic vaccine. An interview with Christophe Ono-dit-Biot; (11) On the discomfort in fiscal culture; (12) Living with Excuses. An interview with Lucius Maltzan und Simon Nehrer; (13) One cannot live in the riot. An interview with Lothar Schröder; (14) Why are more

¹ Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2021, EPUB, 200pp.

and more people leaving reality? An interview with Peter Unfried und Harald Welzer; (15) Instead of an epilogue. Life in the Philosopher's Cave. An interview with René Scheu.

What we experienced in the country, especially in Metro Manila, was the military's mobilization, and the wartime rhetoric that roused it was something not peculiar to us as it was used by leaders around the world. This seemed to be a default reaction to any perceived threat, however, such direction made us fight the wrong war since the biological fiend had nothing to do with the military might but warranted a recognition of a deeper, primal need;² as Camus' *The Plague* and Boccaccio's *Dekameron* exceeded previous purchase records, another path surfaced during the pandemic, a focus on Labyrinthology, on the path to lead oneself out of the webs constructed in the mind.³ The quarantine experience forced each to confront oneself and to contend with an indefinite solitude. From Sloterdijk, one apprehends how a deeper focus on this would have allowed us to better know the differences and the effects of employing terms such as 'lockdown,' 'quarantine,' and even the designation of something as 'essential.' Perhaps through these differences, better policies could have been crafted or more apt recognition given to what was/is indeed vital.

However, the inability to do such stems from a deeper pathology, and the pandemic provided a new mask to Sloterdijk's treatment of cynicality, a new culmination to the world's cynicality away from that of the 80s.⁴ He rehearses his argument:

cynicism from above accrues when individuals believe that they are too powerful to play by the rules of the game – they play with the rules themselves. In cynicism from below, the acrimony of people has its say, the people believe that they are too disadvantaged to adhere to norms that are supposed to apply to everyone but appear to be designed for the better off.⁵

Even the Philippine experience gave testament to this when, for the first, politically advantageous individuals transgressed pandemic measures yet were treated lightly, and the second was also evident when the appellation of a 'frontliner' seemed to be trivialized from its initial medical

² See Sloterdijk, "Das westliche System wird sich als ebenso autoritär erweisen wie das chinesische," *Der Staat streifte seine Samthandschuhe ab. Ausgewählte Gespräche und Beiträge 2020–2021* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2021), EPUB.

³ See *Ibid.*

⁴ See Sloterdijk, "Der Staat zeigt seine eiseme Faust," in *Ibid.*

⁵ Sloterdijk, "Der Mensch, das Distanzwesen," in *Ibid.* Trans. is mine.

association to its extension in various sectors. What is insightful to consider now is how both sides benefited from how media supported, downplayed, or even exaggerated their claims. One may even say that our own labyrinths were/are enlarged through media's exaggerations—be it the psychological impact of social media's explosion through influencers or superstars or mass media's ability to direct a population's political attention.⁶ However, media's capacity to exaggerate and explode information is not a pandemic novelty, and in retrospect, this may have been a reason why some political figures and their followers easily downplayed the virus.⁷ Sloterdijk comments that, "the production of recklessness is the main task of media constructions of reality[,]” and "with the pandemic struck the hour of the wrong strong men: Trump, Bolsonaro, and Johnson believed strength was shown in recklessness."⁸ Away from such recklessness, the pandemic for him left no room for exaggerations due to the precise requirements of medical reports and scientific research and also due to the clear imperative and responsibility of immunitary reason (*immunitäre Vernunft*) not to instances of domination but to our spheres of co-immunism.⁹ Despite containing a positive aspect, he criticizes the number-attention too for such numerical focus displays the structural cynicism involved in the attention given to statistical figures now when the same number of deaths have been previously reported as casualties of war, cancer and other diseases, along with accidents and murders yet not given enough attention.¹⁰ Also, what surfaced was a corresponding cynical

⁶ See Sloterdijk, "Bitte erklären Sie uns die Zeit, in der wir leben!," in *Ibid.*

⁷ See Sloterdijk, "Für Übertreibungen ist kein Platz mehr," in *Ibid.* Sloterdijk mentions how humanity lives in a great media theory seminar (*medientheoretisches Seminar*) and how monothematism (*Monothematismus*) arises during states of emergencies. Yet, and rather unfortunately, these states of emergencies are at times exaggerated not because of the need or clamor of the movement but due to those surrounding it. What makes a topic dominate public space at times is the degree of exaggeration injected into the discourse that makes any rhetoric closer to right-wing politics, especially when anticipation of a political messiah is induced, something unfortunately happening throughout the world. (See Sloterdijk, "Man kann nicht in der Revolte leben," in *Ibid.*) The political regard of the pandemic as mere exaggeration may be considered here: Natalie Colarossi, "8 times world leaders downplayed the coronavirus and put their countries at greater risk for infection," *Business Insider* (11 April 2020), <<https://www.businessinsider.com/times-world-leaders-downplayed-the-coronavirus-threat-2020-4>> and V. Ponzovskiy, et al., "Why is right-wing media consumption associated with lower compliance with COVID-19 measures?," in *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications*, 35, no. 1 (2023), 3–16, <<https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000337>>.

⁸ Sloterdijk, "Warum treten zunehmend Leute aus der Wirklichkeit aus?," and "Bitte erklären Sie uns die Zeit, in der wir leben!," in *Der Staat streifte seine Samthandschuhe ab*. Trans. is mine. For the Strong Men political approach, see also Sloterdijk, "Statt eines Nachworts. Leben in der Philosophenhöhle."

⁹ See Sloterdijk, "Für Übertreibungen ist kein Platz mehr" and "Ko-Immunität im Zeitalter von Pandemien und Klimawandel," in *Ibid.*

¹⁰ See Sloterdijk, "Leben wir über unsere Verhältnisse?," in *Ibid.*

fetish for the latest number cult [*Zahlenkult*], the desire to know the latest tally, as if those are mere statistical figures without corresponding to actual bereavements.¹¹

We ought to ask ourselves now what we have learned (or not) from the pandemic. Sloterdijk's musings point a couple out that perhaps we can currently answer differently: he shows that we have not learned to accept death, perhaps easier under religious auspices, especially those who are placed at the forefronts of either a microbiological or actual war, and maybe this stems from an unrestricted greed for life;¹² we have not learned to be patient, since the pandemic required patience and such capacity is not borne of contemporary, instant times;¹³ we have not learned to expect more from the state, specifically with the looming neo-imperial arrangements on the global stage by leading nations, or even with one's society's neo-feudalistic structure due to the explosion of multimillionaires thanks to new forms of contemporary media.¹⁴ Above all, though, we once questioned ourselves what life is after the pandemic, and we hoped for a better one, one that cares for nature and the planet, with a better social consciousness that extends into practice.¹⁵ Yet we look at ourselves today surrounded by extreme weather and major conflicts from the Russian aggression in Ukraine to the decades-long skirmishes between Israel and Palestine, and even the heightened tensions resulting from China's actions to its neighboring countries.

With the state's changed relation to its citizens during the pandemic, we now recognize more fully the enormous capacity it has without the pretense of civility; the book's final chapter ends with a paradox of being happy in a neo-collective state, from the premise that the state is each citizen's main debtor. Sloterdijk responds, "I can reassure you that illiberal principles are rejected at the entrance of the Philosopher's cave. Whether the society outside remains immune still remains to be seen."¹⁶ How liberality and its opposite may manifest themselves in civil society remains a pernicious feature of any democracy. Although one may remain safe in theorizing or conceptualizing from the vantage of isolation, it remains an open question of what the future of democracy or even of society may be, of the willingness of we, the sovereign people, to take collective action for more positive ideals, when we can easily fall prey to authoritarian measures and in fact desire them.

¹¹ See Sloterdijk, "Statt eines Nachworts. Leben in der Philosophenhöhle," in *Ibid.*

¹² See Sloterdijk, "Leben wir über unsere Verhältnisse?," in *Ibid.*

¹³ See Sloterdijk, "Der Staat zeigt seine eiseme Faust," in *Ibid.*

¹⁴ See Sloterdijk, "Leben ohne Ausreden," in *Ibid.*

¹⁵ See Sloterdijk, "Der Mensch, das Distanzwesen," in *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Sloterdijk, "Statt eines Nachworts. Leben in der Philosophenhöhle," in *Ibid.*

Despite the insightful points raised in the book, one is drawn to juxtapose the German or European political landscape, which Sloterdijk criticizes, and that of the Philippines. One must constantly bear in mind how the intended audience was primarily the German (and French) public. Anyone who has travelled abroad would have been confronted by the stark difference of the pandemic's treatment elsewhere; the use of facemasks during flights or in crowded public places like the huge airports of Dubai or Singapore could provide an initial indication of the traveler's country of origin—those wearing masks recognized to have flown from parts of Asia or some other developing region. We may have faced the pandemic's wave as a whole global community, however, contrary to the title of a still untranslated book of his, *Im selben Boot* (In the Same Boat),¹⁷ we are *not* in the same boat. Akin to this point, I return to the title of the current book under review and raise the question, what if the state never wore or has long taken off its velvet gloves? This is a question not for Sloterdijk, who was referring to his own cultural and political experiences, but for thinkers receptive to his ideas who have a different social and intellectual landscape to contend with. It is an ignominy that certain scholars flirt with the iron fists of the ungloved state and, with the voice of the academia not as prized in the country, the possibility of illiberality being welcomed in the Philosopher's cave.

What is exceptional in this collection of Sloterdijk's essays is the interplay of the wide array of concepts across chapters – such as immunity, co-immunism, donation/gift, cynicality, the World Interior – that he establishes in other books. Despite being short paragraphs, his responses seem to deepen one's understanding not simply of his conservative views of the pandemic or of certain themes he touches, but also of oneself and the capacity to now disagree with his insights that, during their conception, seemed to provide to the reader a beacon of hope of life after the pandemic. Likewise, the arrangement of the essays allow for a somewhat sustained reading since the last theme of each chapter makes its return in the following. Finally, the interview approach allows a lighter reading compared to his denser, essay-type books. Those who appreciate this would likewise find the following works to be insightful: *Selected Exaggerations* (2013; trans. 2015), *Neither Sun nor Death* (2006; trans. 2006), *Selbstversuch – Ein Gespräch mit Carlos Oliveira* (1996), or even the untranslated three volumes of his *Zeilen und Tage* (2012, 2018, 2023).¹⁸ On a final note, I wish to mention that Sloterdijk prefaced

¹⁷ See Peter Sloterdijk, *Im selben Boot. Versuch über die Hyperpolitik* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1993).

¹⁸ Peter Sloterdijk, *Selected Exaggerations – Conversations and Interviews 1993-2012*, ed. by Bernhard Klein, trans. by Karen Margolis (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), with Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs, *Neither Sun nor Death*, trans. by Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), *Selbstversuch – Ein Gespräch mit Carlos Oliveira* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1996), *Zeilen und*

this work with a precaution that these statements were made with a great lack of binding knowledge that perhaps we have access to today.¹⁹ However, this lack of knowledge is earnestly not something characteristic to the statements made in the book but rather to ourselves, a lack of binding knowledge of who we are, of our reality, and why we must change ourselves (*und warum wir uns ändern müssen*).

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Tage – Notizen 2008–2011 (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012), *Neue Zeilen und Tage – Notizen 2011-2013* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2018), *Zeilen und Tage III – Notizen 2013-2016* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2023)

¹⁹ See Sloterdijk, *Der Staat streifte seine Samthandschuhe ab*, Vorbemerkungen.