

## Flirting with fascism – the Sloterdijk debate

According to a recent article in *The Observer* (10 October 1999) the fashionable dinner tables of German society are buzzing with controversy over 'the death of critical theory and the future of metaphysics'. The article refers to a debate provoked by a conference address given at Elmau in Bavaria last July by Peter Sloterdijk. His paper, 'Regeln für den Menschenpark: Ein Antwortschreiben zum Brief über den Humanismus' (Rules for the Human Theme-Park: A Reply to the Letter on Humanism), was addressed to an international conference on 'Philosophy after Heidegger'. Copies of the address began circulating among academics shortly after the conference. Subsequently, two heavily critical articles were published in the national press. Sloterdijk's bad-tempered response to these articles (*Die Zeit*, 9 September 1999) has generated an animated quarrel, whose participants have included Manfred Frank, Ernst Tugendhat, Ronald Dworkin and Slavoj Žižek, among others.

In his conference address Sloterdijk seeks to problematize discussion of the ethics of gene technology. He mounts a critique of the legacy of humanism after Heidegger, which, he claims, misrecognizes and places artificial limitations upon the potential for human development. In opposition to this legacy, he attempts to establish grounds for alternative interpretative practices through which to think the effects of biological research. Much of the controversy arises from his use of the German terms *Züchtung* (breeding, cultivation) and *Selektion* (selection) to elaborate an anti-humanist theory which would orient the use of gene technology.

Sloterdijk is Professor of Philosophy at the Fachhochschule in Karlsruhe. He became well known with the publication of his bestselling first book, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* (1983, translated as *The Critique of Cynical Reason* in 1987), in which he traces the fall of modern consciousness into a pervasive cynicism, understood as participation in a 'collective, realistically attuned way of seeing things'. Ironically, it argues, the success of enlightening and consciousness-raising critical interventions has been to make it clear to everyone that they are miserable, whilst not

providing them with the means to change their situation. Thus, 'cynicism is *enlightened false consciousness*'. In response, Sloterdijk attempts to reanimate a positive mode of *kynicism*, taken from Diogenes, through which to phrase new and resilient modes of enlightenment. One of the main characteristics of this positive mode of cynicism is its emphasis on strategic, satirical provocations.

### Gene dream

In his address at Elmau, Sloterdijk develops just such a provocative position: the problem with humanism lies in its assumption of an empathetic and receptive relation between people. He describes European society, from the ancients onwards, as having developed according to the codification of communication in a 'friendship initiating telecommunication in the medium of writing'. For him, the development of civilized society has proceeded according to characteristically linguistic and national identifications, where writing acts as a tool for the task of holding power over others.

Nowhere in Sloterdijk's contribution to the Elmau conference does he go into detail about modern genetic research. Rather, his examples are from Heidegger, Nietzsche and Plato. He addresses what one might call the 'pre-history' of gene technology and the social conventions which characterize its discussion. He argues for a reception of genetic research that recognizes its results as an opportunity to reinvent what it is to be human.

Sloterdijk inflects Heidegger's assertion of ontological difference in the 'Letter on Humanism' with a specifically technological bias. Identifying the condition for empathetic relationships – which structure relations of power through texts – he gestures towards the human genome as a kind of alphabet, a codex, from which human needs can be read and which can structure how they are met. His proposal is for a thorough technologization of humanity through genetic manipulation, generalized as a principle with which to govern the progress of society. In this technological dream of a new order, gene technology promises a recoding of the social/human according to a reductive

model of the biologically determined organism, the body. The social ramifications of this recoding are entirely speculative.

The latter part of Sloterdijk's address is a meditation on the criteria for the selection of those that will govern via gene technology, and the characterization of the role they would have in shaping society. As such it has been received in the German press with alarm. Thomas Assheur (*Die Zeit*, 2 September) reads Sloterdijk as calling for an elite group of philosophers and 'appropriate' scientists to take up and transform the role of Plato's 'statesman' to make the decisions that will guide humanity into the future. But what would differentiate this group from those already guiding the situation? Sloterdijk gives only the vaguest clues. The corrective measures this group would perform rely on the historically unique opportunity presented by gene technology to read a future from the codex of anthropo-technology.

to establish normative criteria for genetic interventions. In the process the existing relation of subjectivity to the body as the mysterious ground of experience would be lost. For Žižek the particularity of the body as that which escapes *my* thought, but which as phantasm structures *my* experience, encodes the potential of freedom in experience. To be fully aware of one's body as overdetermined sphere of choice would negate the basis of this, at least possible, freedom.

From a very different perspective, Dworkin's right-wing, pro-genetic engineering response (*Die Zeit*, 16 September) defends progress as a good thing and tells us to trust institutional science to make the right decisions. He lists more or less patronizing examples to reassure us that genetic research will not end with diminished biological diversity nor in the escalation of social injustice. The anxiety that we would be playing god by allowing the development of gene technology



Slavoj Žižek (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 23 September) characteristically finds the questions raised in the debate prefigured in a movie, *Gattaca*, which introduces the problem of a social reality structured by gene technology. Žižek argues that what Sloterdijk proposes will simply reproduce on another, stricter level, already existing forms of constructed inequality based on the manipulation of power and culture. Regardless of whether this is done in the name of a more reliable form of egalitarianism, it would only reproduce present social constrictions as the conditions of a new slavery. The key, for Žižek, to Sloterdijk's misunderstanding of the problem lies in his faith in technology, as such, to produce a better life. Žižek thinks this would lead to different and more dangerous forms of objectification than exist already.

Sloterdijk's re-alphabetization of the human would dismiss the impasse presented to thought by the demand

free rein is false. There is no essential difference between the development of gene manipulation and that of any other previous new technology – which is right, in a sense. Dworkin's argument rests on the idea that progress has always brought with it developments in ethical thought, and that if we don't allow this we will sink back into ignorance. Both of these thoughts seem to miss the fact that some norms have been contingently and often violently imposed. Or, obversely, some norms have been granted validity only after a struggle. Žižek's liking for science fiction seems more realistic when one thinks of the progress Dworkin outlines. Scientists are as thoughtful and as caring as anybody, but the new technologies of gene manipulation are not emerging into a world free of interests. Dworkin has faith that some form of egalitarianism will prevail, perhaps in the form of government grants to poor people to help

them choose the characteristics of their offspring. But these suggestions seem much more likely to follow the path of radically limited choice, marketed as freedom, which characterizes other, already existing applications of technology.

At the beginning of September, Sloterdijk published an extraordinary letter (*Die Zeit*, 2 September) accusing Habermas of agitating against him. The tone of the letter is petulant: 'you have talked *about* me with numerous people, never *with* me.' It appears that Habermas – who has not published anything on this affair – did, however, write letters and make phone calls to criticize the Elmau address. Sloterdijk also accuses him of sending copies of the text to ex-students working in the press, marked with instructions on how to misinterpret it. All of this is summed up in the claim that Habermas 'objectifies' Sloterdijk. Habermas's criticisms position Sloterdijk 'as a mechanism, not as a person'. This makes Sloterdijk feel free to vent his own spleen: 'You belong to the inhuman heirs of the ideology critique style of thought.... You are, in this, only an average supporter of a problematic habit that one once glossed over with the honorary office of critique.' All very entertaining. The letter rises to its hyperbolic finale in which – on the grounds that Habermas chose to discuss his speech among colleagues and not directly with him – Sloterdijk accuses Habermas of performatively contradicting the premisses of his own discourse theory. If Habermas (of all people) achieves his polemical goals in such an underhand fashion, then what remains of the inheritance of the tradition of Frankfurt Critical Theory. Not much, says Sloterdijk.

Critical theory is, on this Second of September, dead. She was long since bedridden, the sullen old woman, now she has passed away completely. We will gather at the grave of an epoch, to take stock, but also to think of the end of an hypocrisy. Thinking means thanking, said Heidegger. I say, rather, thinking means to heave a sigh of relief. (*Die Zeit*, 9 September)

Even if we take Sloterdijk's letter seriously, it is still a source of surprise that the author of *The Critique of Cynical Reason* is overcome in the face of the outrage his own provocation has caused. Manfred Frank (*Die Zeit*, 23 September), himself no fan of Habermas, dismisses Sloterdijk's claims as a 'pointless flirtation with embarrassing material'. Ernst Tugendhat, in his contribution, says Sloterdijk's claims are 'rubbish', asking 'what have things come to when critique must always first obtain the consent of the author?' If significance

is to be granted this exchange then perhaps it could be found in elaboration of Sloterdijk's failure to live up to his own call for bold, *kynikal*, provocation ?

To the more substantial points Sloterdijk presents, Tugendhat responds with great reservation. A programme of genetic 'breeding' or 'training' discussed in terms of selection, and of specifically German experience, that does not attempt to think through the legacy of the Second World War is naive and dangerous. Tugendhat holds Sloterdijk to account over this point by asking, 'Why does Sloterdijk choose the word selection? When I hear this word in this context I think involuntarily of the selection on the platform at Auschwitz. Is that only my problem?' He answers that the historic resonances of this particular word *should* be thought in this context (there are many other words that carry a similar meaning). He describes two senses in which selection has been practised – selection through breeding (practised conventionally in all cultures) and selection through extermination – and claims that without an explicitly historical understanding of the relationship between these two, no clear distinctions can be made. In this case the discussion of selection threatens to reproduce, implicitly, the previously explicit dangers of the National Socialist era: selection, 'determined only according to power'.

Sloterdijk seems to have risked his reputation and career in the paradoxical and ironically generous act of falling on the sword of fascist ideology to give others the opportunity of demonstrating their own relation to the ideological interests that inform their views of the future. His reactions to his critics, especially Habermas, tell us that this was not fully his intention. But his Elmau address leaves the reader puzzled as to what work he actually means this text to do. It is clear that he wanted explicitly to provoke, using the particular materials and combinations of claims that he did. He got the controversy he sought. However, it was his contribution to the debate which diverted the argument and began its degeneration. His provocational stance, which might have redeemed the weaker aspects of his arguments, and even his flirtation with fascist ideology, would have had to register in what Sloterdijk did with the controversy once he had provoked it.

*All of the texts discussed here are available on the Internet at <http://www.zeit.de>, which has a webpage devoted to the debate.*

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