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Anthropotechnical practising in the foam-world

Abstract

I begin by acknowledging the profusion of Peter Sloterdijk's published work, the suggestion by Bruno Latour that it may be on the side of design, and Sloterdijk's pugnacious aversion to professorial critique. I focus on what I consider to be the crucial and vexed relationship between the general immunology of the *Spheres* trilogy [1998–2004] and the general ascetology of *You Must Change Your Life* [2009]. I present an analytical reconstruction of Sloterdijk's account of originary spheric being-with in the trilogy, focused on its culmination in the foam-world; I suggest this account is too ambiguous on key matters of basic ontological structure and I question whether the foam metaphor is adequate as a description of intersubjectivity today. Against the backdrop of this discussion I consider whether the general ascetology of Sloterdijk's second anthropotechnics involves practising in, or practising on, the shells of symbolic immunity and conclude the latter. Setting this alongside the trilogy's insistence that cells in the foam are 'co-fragile', I argue that anthropotechnical practising in the foam-world is suffused with a violence which Sloterdijk is reluctant to theorise. Registering one significant undeclared context of his discussion of self-enhancement, in postmodern management theory, I suggest that successful anthropotechnical practising in the foam-world requires the capacity to ignore other people and their interests. I note that Sloterdijk's one-eyed embrace of competitive self-enhancement in *You Must Change Your Life* has since been qualified in brief remarks in *What Happened in the Twentieth Century?* [2016] but not substantively reconsidered. In conclusion, I pay tribute to the anthropotechnical lesson of Sloterdijk's theoretical project, notwithstanding its design flaws and continuity errors.

Keywords

Sloterdijk; immunology; ascetology; anthropotechnics; foam; sphere; bubble; *You Must Change Your Life*; Latour; co-fragility; neoliberalism

Anthropotechnical practising in the foam-world

‘In my movie I’m putting everything in. Even a tap-dancing sailor.’ (Fellini, 8½)

8½ begins with a dream sequence in which Fellini’s creatively blocked screen alter-ego, Guido the director, sits trapped and asphyxiating in the hermetic capsule of a stationary car parked on the deck of a ferry that is nevertheless conveying him – and the gawping weekenders around him – slowly somewhere. When he escapes from the car it is to soar upward into the clouds before coming crashing down to an earthly awakening. Waking himself by self-suffocation from this nightmare of stymied enclosure followed by soaring weightlessness – in which he became unstuck only to come unstuck – the director’s therapy is to breathe slowly and deeply. As he breathes he can begin to experiment with a superabundance of worldly ideas and things, drawing them into the uterine cavity of his creative mind until from all of this practising the film is made. Reversing the intersubjective dynamic on the ferry, as the director prolongs his experimenting, drawing ever more of the outside into the ever more capacious inside of the work – even a tap-dancing sailor – his entourage becomes progressively more exasperated and he gradually more serene. The directors cure themselves by pulling everything into the healing orbit of a work at once aesthetic and anthropotechnical. As the sphere of the work expands, those involved fret about their investment in it and the artist’s sanity; as the work approaches completion they fear some sleight of hand, an impending final humiliation to repay their perhaps misplaced confidence.

I am also talking about Peter Sloterdijk, who similarly “writes a lot about a lot of things” (Thrift, “Peter Sloterdijk and the Philosopher’s Stone” 136). Although it may be an exaggeration to say he has already “written about almost everything” (Ernste, “The Geography of Spheres” 273), the profusion of his existing body of work is such that, given time, one feels it might well expand to draw in even the tap-dancing sailor. The exorbitant “generosity” of his voluminous enterprise perturbs even Sloterdijk’s most accomplished and longsuffering English translator, for whom its embrace of hyperbole sometimes also involves fact-dissolving generalisations (Hoban, “The Language of Give and Take” 117–8). Stuart Elden, who played a prominent role in the early dissemination of Sloterdijk’s work in the English-speaking world, cautioned his own endeavour by also conveying nagging doubts about that work’s scope and superficiality (Elden, “Worlds, Engagements, Temperaments” 3). So wide does Sloterdijk range, it is as though a kynical dog-philosopher were pissing on everything he encounters to mark out his territory or just for the fun of it.

Long before the fights with Jürgen Habermas and Axel Honneth, Sloterdijk poured scorn on professors: “fools of their own doctrinal structures”, “vain babblers” who “complicate the simplest things to the point of unrecognizability” (Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* 181). Not unlike Jacques Rancière in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, he sneered at their stultifying curricula which organize the administering of knowledge as mere externality: “The more systematically education is planned, the more it is a matter of accident or luck whether education as initiation into conscious living takes place at all” (84). He held open the hope for teaching as a deviation from what was expected, whereas “The

ordinary guides for children, teachers and others who also take money bring young people where they for the most part want to go anyway, to career stages and the orator's rostrum." (Sloterdijk, "The Plunge and the Turn" 37) On television, in the newspapers – flaunting his opinions as a philosopher "on the stage", engaged not reluctantly but fervently in public debate – in museums and architecture schools, as well as over the umpteen thousand pages of his books, he has fashioned himself into that rare object of envy: a scholar of stature who is also a charismatic teacher (5). To professors in their bubble he imagines his work spells *Sphärentod*: his mise-en-scène of three discipline-bound and dull-witted professors, who mull inconclusively over the significance of the *Spheres* trilogy at its close, is ironising and Sloterdijk's irony is primarily not self-directed. One declares: "It will not seize the masses; even academics feel unease." (Sloterdijk, *Foams* 808) Especially academics feel unease. More argumentative real professors could have pointed out that, in numerous respects, Sloterdijk is entirely in step with a neoliberal university which overvalues quantitative production and slick performance. His polymathic project can all too readily be translated into a pallid managerialist 'vision' of interdisciplinarity ready to be tossed down to subordinates (as by Thrift, "Peter Sloterdijk and the Philosopher's Stone" 146) and the way he urges philosophers "who remain hidden in the bosom of universities" to "leave their hiding place behind" in this time of "global crisis", to "take to the streets and plazas, to the *pages littéraires* and screens, to schools and popular festivals" and make their discipline "relevant" reeks of the public engagement 'agenda' that is currently sweeping British universities and saturating the nation's airwaves with professorial commentary, to the point of asphyxiation (Sloterdijk, *What Happened?* 105). His charismatic performances might be said to 'set a new standard' for the ordinary lecturer, shaming them into enhancement like a TED talker's rehearsed and scripted passion. It is possible to take a more positive view of his transcendent relation to the university system he has so often denigrated, as Paul North does in his sharp-eyed encomium, "Absolute Teacher, Sloterdijk", or as Jean-Pierre Couture has done by seeing him as an inspirational rejoinder to the proletarianising overspecialisation of contemporary academia (Couture, *Sloterdijk* 95, 118). Yet it is worth noticing that many who work in them feel that the neoliberal university already views them with something very like Sloterdijk's scorn and shares his hectoring insistence that they enhance their performance and 'raise their game': you especially, professor, must change your life!

Sloterdijk occupies a privileged and singular institutional position, as Rector of the Karlsruhe School of Design, an establishment situated to one side of the ordinary university system in Germany. For Bruno Latour, this setting is a clue that Sloterdijk's theoretical writing is on the side of "design", which Latour thinks betokens modesty by contrast with real construction and, perforce, "an attentiveness to *details*" (Latour, "A Cautious Prometheus?" 153). This attentiveness to details in their profusion has also been accounted for as a corollary of Sloterdijk's taking space seriously in philosophical terms, with "confidence in facing up to constant variation" (Thrift, "Peter Sloterdijk and the Philosopher's Stone" 139). Yet as North has discerned, Sloterdijk's *Spheres* trilogy is rather more than an agglomerated manifold of spatial stuff: while the sphere has a spatial or ontological meaning, one which will in due course be a major concern of this article, it also has a more generalized and abstract crypto-Kantian sense as a "sphere schemata", the pure and empty form of all schematizing, "the horizon of all horizons" which "contains all antitheses" (North, "Absolute Teacher, Sloterdijk" 45, 33, 34). The question of the 'spheric' unity of Sloterdijk's work, beyond its antitheses, over and above the profusion of its local

detail, has nevertheless been avoided by most of his scholarly readers: North and Couture are, to my knowledge, the only ones to have approached the entirety of his work and with a presumption that it might have this kind of overall integrity. Most of his readers prefer to focus instead on a particular moment of his thirty-year project. There are various reasons why this might be, among them the feeling that there is too much to tackle everything, or that Sloterdijk is not a systematic thinker who lends himself to a reading in terms of overall unity, or that such readings have no value. However, the rationale for restricting the scope of discussion is seldom made the subject of explicit comment by Sloterdijk's scholarly readers. His many detractors on the Left – those who can bring themselves to actually read him – have been complaining of a neo-conservative, cynical, hawkish, *Kehre* since the publication of *Rage and Time* [2006] (Couture, *Sloterdijk* 89). My undertaking here will necessarily be more narrowly focused than North's and Couture's but it starts out with a similar eye to the overall coherence of his thought. In what follows I explore a particularly vexed yet crucial juncture: the relationship between Sloterdijk's spheric general immunology, as the trilogy [1998–2004] envisages it operating in today's foam-world, and the general ascetology of *You Must Change Your Life* [2009]. I thus seek to probe and explicate the relationship between the *Spheres* trilogy and what Couture delineates as the second phase of Sloterdijk's anthropotechnics (Couture, *Sloterdijk* 45), works from either side of his alleged turn. This is a juncture which Sloterdijk has attempted to make himself, although his remarks in making this join raise more questions than they answer; even if, as readers, we do not generally think questions of systematic unity are of paramount importance this particular moment of joining can still make some claim to our attention.

Introducing *You Must Change Your Life*, Sloterdijk signals its continuity with the *Spheres* trilogy by noting that human beings have realised that they “exist not only in ‘material conditions’, but also in symbolic immune systems and ritual shells” (Sloterdijk, *You Must* 3); from the trilogy we know that “Spheres are immune-systemically effective space creations”, though as has already been noted the sphere also has other meanings than simply the spatial (Sloterdijk, *Spheres* 1: *Bubbles* 28; North, “Absolute Teacher” 33–6). In Sloterdijk's introduction to *You Must Change Your Life*, in addition to the human body's biological immune system, he identifies three types, levels, or layers, of cultural immune systems: (i) the socio-immunological (legal, “solidaristic” and military), for the resolution of confrontation with aggressors and harmful neighbours; (ii) the symbolic, or “psycho-immunological”, practices designed to cope with human “vulnerability through fate, including mortality” by deploying “mental armour” and (iii) the anthropotechnical, with which he asserts *You Must* is primarily concerned (Sloterdijk, *You Must*, 9–10). While this may appear to situate his second anthropotechnics very neatly in relation to his spheric general immunology, grafting the later book cleanly on to the earlier trilogy, the picture is immediately complicated by the fact that all three layers of the human cultural immune system are also said to function “in close collaborative interaction and functional augmentation” (9). Anthropotechnics thus not only constitutes the third layer but can, it seems, encompass and functionally augment (or diminish) the other two layers in its concern with the way in which “humans from the most diverse cultures have attempted to optimize their cosmic and immunological status” (10). In so far as Sloterdijk is concerned in *You Must* with “the biography of *Homo immunologicus*” in its generality it is clear that he is concerned not just with this third layer but simultaneously with all three layers of the human cultural immune system as he understands it. Rather than a clean graft of the “general ascetology” of *You Must* on to the “general immunology” of *Spheres*, Sloterdijk's only superficially

straightforward presentation of their relationship leaves open the possibility that *You Must* may even have been construed by its author as a tacit revision of, rather than simply an addition to, the immunological paradigm of *Spheres*, and regardless of how he construed it it may nevertheless be such a revision: more dangerous supplement than simple sequel.

Put succinctly, the issue at stake here is individualism: on the face of it, the spheric general immunology is resolutely anti-individualist and the second anthropotechnics decidedly less so. Couture suggests that in *You Must* the “We” of the spheres seems to have been discarded “in favor of focusing exclusively on a ‘You’ imperative aimed at self-improvement through exercise” (Couture, *Sloterdijk* 45), with Sloterdijk himself subsequently suggesting that, today, “the search for identity and immunity must increasingly shift from collective to individual strategies” (Sloterdijk, *What Happened in the 20th Century?* 53). Whether this individualist emphasis can be read as anything other than a flagrant contradiction, or undoing, of the trilogy’s captivating account of originary intersubjectivity is to be established. My suggestion is that an accurate understanding of the (dis)junction between these two phases of his project is critical if a meaningful assessment is to be made of the political bearing of his anthropotechnical work, as perhaps of his entire body of work. The features of Sloterdijk’s work I have surveyed in this lengthy preamble – its profusion and its capaciousness in accommodating flourish and detail, as well as its author’s pugnacious preemptive strikes against scholarly critical interpreters – do tend to discourage analysis of the type I undertake here while, to my mind, making such scrutiny all the more imperative. Sloterdijk may be a gas giant, too engrossed in his own inspirational effulgence to tie up loose ends, an orb-maker rather than a carpet-weaver. His readers may be ants on the carpet of his work, scrambling around trying to discern its overall pattern. Yet is that pattern, not to mention the structural integrity of the entire fabric, which concern me as antlike I now proceed.¹ My argument is that there are design flaws in both spheric general immunology and in practising general ascetology, flaws which are less apparent when each domain is approached separately but which become glaring and substantial when the two are conjoined. I will first identify these two sets of problems separately before discussing their combined effect.

Spheric general immunology and the limitations of the foam model

In this section I present an analytical reconstruction of the paradigm of general immunology in the *Spheres* trilogy, focused mainly on originary intersubjectivity and immunology in the foam-world of contemporary society, before moving on, in the next section, to anthropotechnical practising. In the trilogy Sloterdijk asserts that “What recent philosophers referred to as ‘being-in-the-world’ first of all, and in most cases, means being-in-spheres”, that “living always means building spheres” and that spheres are “immune-systemically effective space creations” (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 1: Bubbles* 46, 28, 28). In other words, rather than being “thrown” into the world alone, as Heidegger suggested, humans as subjects and species are contained and nurtured in protecting spheres, starting with the womb, the first sphere or “bubble”. If Heidegger gives us “a lonely, weak, hysterical-heroic existential subject that thinks it is the first to die, and remains painfully uncertain of the more hidden aspects of its embeddedness in intimacies and solidarities” (341), Sloterdijk’s first volume develops Hannah Arendt’s turn from death to birth in her discussion of “natality” with a rhapsodic gynaecological fantasia which similarly seeks “a *positive* theory of man’s [sic]

finitude” (Van Tuinen, “Transgeneous Philosophy” 49). Rather than an essentially lonely subject, Sloterdijk posits an originary human being-with which finds its first expression in the fetus’s cohabitation of the womb with the placenta, the first companion which Sloterdijk, in a lyrical pastiche of existential-phenomenological style, names “the With” (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 1: Bubbles* 356), “the most intimate and general organ of relationships”, which “disappears as soon as it has served its purpose” (358) but which, while it served that purpose, was “our private nymph fountain and our sworn genius” (360). He shows a very striking image of a pharaoh’s procession headed by his “placental standards” (381) and tells of a German tradition honouring the placenta by burying it under a fruit tree (378), before male medical science in the latter part of the eighteenth century taught us all to abhor the afterbirth. He speculates about the connection between “the cultural excommunication of the placenta” and the birth of “modern individualism” (384): “since people stopped burying the intimate With in the house or under the trees and roses, all individuals are latent traitors who have a guilt without a concept to deny; with their resolutely independent lives, they deny that they are constantly repeating the betrayal of their most intimate companion in their remorselessly autonomous being.” (386) He moves effortlessly from this phenomenological gynaecology to the theology of the Trinity, which he uses to develop his account of originary human being-with, or “being-in-relation”: the three elements “produce, harbor and surround themselves in such close reciprocity that their intertwinement exceeds all external conditions” (614).

After birth, the counterpart of the evolutionary human characteristic of neoteny is the necessity that the infant be held in a protective sphere if it is to survive and flourish. Sloterdijk construes this environment of nurturing and all later cultural spheres as, in a fairly strong sense, uterine analogues or reconstructions, “amniotic communes” (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 2: Globes* 200): “peoples, empires, churches and, above all, modern nation states, are not least space-political attempts to recreate fantastic wombs for infantilized mass populations by imaginary and institutional means.” (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 1: Bubbles* 67–8) To exist within a sphere is to live in an “inner, co-animated realm”, to be protected and differentiated from externality with its overwhelming mass of “dead and outer things” (54). Sloterdijk’s underlying conviction is that human beings can only live – and in evolutionary, historical and individual terms have only lived – by protecting themselves from complete exposure to the deathly coldness of radical or absolute externality: “Humans have never lived in a direct relationship with ‘nature’” (46). Whether it be a couple forging the sphere of their household in the midst of a twenty-first-century global city, or a group of hunter-gatherers establishing the circle of their shared life in the Paleolithic Age, or a Mesopotamian city with staggeringly thick walls, for Sloterdijk essentially the same sphere-building activity is in evidence: “among those who truly live together, inner relationships take absolute precedence over so-called environmental ones” – what is being asserted is “the primacy of the inner” (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 2: Globes* 192). These people could all be saying: “Here, from the indifferent, immense space, we cut out an animated orb, the community that we are: this is the place we will inhabit as our cosmic quarters. Here we know what we mean when we say we are at home *in the world.*” (195) Being-in-spheres thus involves existing with others inside a nurturing, meaning-rich, bounded, “relational” space of interiority (Ernste, “The Geography of Spheres” 274), whereas – to skip quickly through the second volume – what ‘globalization’ in the dominant economico-political sense of the term implies is “the indifference of a space in which no dwelling occurs” (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 2: Globes* 897). This dominant conception of globalization, which for

Sloterdijk boils down to the global market, implies that “all suppliers and customers meet in a general externality”, unprotected and infinitely exposed in a “homogeneous space” of radical externality characterised by the coldness of its “homogeneous indifference” (950, 947, 777). Alluding to Nietzsche and Heidegger, Sloterdijk suggests that under the sphere-shattering pressure of globalization “the last humans have become the external ones” as they are pulled “toward the general emptying of the inner world”, drawn by comfort and self-objectifying science (in particular, technoscience and neuroscience), as much as by hardship and scarcity, to self-externalization as “the ‘they’” [*das Man*] (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 1: Bubbles* 629). Though unprecedented in its intensity, the economic and scientific pressure of this general externality is nevertheless viewed by Sloterdijk as a pull or tendency, rather than an unavoidable destiny: he remains optimistic about the enduring power of the countervailing human tendency towards sphere-creation, if not about our capacity for awareness of it (627). According to his developmental narrative it is only after the grander spheres of cosmos, tribe, ecumene or nation have been shattered that they are replaced by the contemporary form of being-in-spheres, “being-in-foam” (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 3: Foams* 59).

Foam: “The term stands for systems or aggregates of spheric neighborhoods in which each individual ‘cell’ constitutes a self-augmenting context (more colloquially: a world, a place), an intimate space of meaning’ (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 3: Foams* 52). Unlike the Mesopotamian cities Sloterdijk surveyed in the second volume, to use one of his many examples of hard-walled spheric constructions, foams and the cells comprising them, are said to be thin-walled and therefore fragile – moreover each cell in the foam shares its thin boundary wall with several other surrounding cells, implying their “co-fragility” (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 3: Foams* 236; Borch, “Foam Architecture” 552). Foams “tend to be ungovernable structures” (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 1: Bubbles* 73) and Sloterdijk’s theory – or descriptive-morphological metaphor – is intended to reflect his conviction that today “‘life’ unfolds multifocally, multiperspectively and heterarchically” (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 3: Foams* 23). Foams are accordingly thought to be as resistant to totalizing description as they are to sovereign rule: “every cell and every association of cells, that is to say culture, is incorporated into a fluctuating variety of one-sided and reciprocal imitations, crossings and mixtures in which no homogeneous basic form can ever be identified” (463–4). Nevertheless, the fragility and shared character of the cell walls enable imitative-mimetic resonances to spread easily from one cell to another. Sloterdijk draws on sociologist Gabriel Tarde’s *Laws of Imitation* [1890] to suggest that the primary relation between cells in the foam is imitative, a mimetic resonance which the mass media intensify and channel. It is not clear from Sloterdijk’s account why such imitative-mimetic resonance is said to replace the “general magic of intersubjectivity”, as he analysed its development from the fifteenth century in the first volume in waves including sympathetic magic, mesmerism and psychoanalysis, above all transference (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 1: Bubbles* 124), though he may simply consider this a matter of historical contingency: it may simply be that what we know as Modern individualism describes the replacement of earlier forms of rich intersubjective relationship by their degraded mass-mediatised descendent, imitative resonance – but if so then this constitutes a substantial, though tacit, retrospective historicizing qualification of the first volume’s account of an originary being-with which finds essentially similar expression in solidarity, the primitive clearing, Mesopotamian walled cities and contemporary “communes, teams, project groups” (45).

Sloterdijk's theory, metaphor, or morphology, of foam looks much more plausible as coherent social theory, or description, from a top-down ('administrative') perspective of the sort presupposed in the several images Sloterdijk reproduces of foams or foam-like structures (for example Sloterdijk, *Spheres 3: Foams* 236). Its deficiencies are occluded by Sloterdijk's selective and, at key moments in this third volume, excessively abstract presentation. Indeed, it proves frustratingly difficult to determine from his lengthy account what the basic ontological features of the cells, or bubbles, within a foam are supposed to be and to say with confidence what might typically constitute such a cell and its contents. I address three interrelated and, by Sloterdijk unresolved, questions about the structure of the foam-world: (i) does each cell in a foam typically contain one individual human or several? (ii) if each cell can contain more than one human, how do those within it relate intersubjectively and to what extent is their mode of relating different from the way in which the cells are said to relate to one another in the foam – and how is one geared with the other? and (iii) to what extent is the nature of human intersubjectivity today adequately captured by the spatial form of being-in-foam?

One of the distinctive features of Sloterdijk's account is that each cell within the foam is said to perform an immunological function by conditioning its own air, or atmosphere. This implies that, in continuity with the originary spheric intersubjectivity postulated in the first volume and developed in the second, there may be several people within it. Indeed, Sloterdijk says at one point that it would be appropriate to envisage the cells in the foam as "human households" (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 3: Foams* 232), in other words quasi-autonomous administrable units composed of one or more people. Yet in his discussion of Elias Canetti's tribute to Hermann Broch, Sloterdijk says: "Canetti praises Broch's ability to view all people ecologically, as it were: in every person he recognizes a singular existence in its own breathing air, surrounded by an unmistakable climatic shell, integrated into a personal 'respiratory economy'" (171). As Borch has noted, Broch's work – and Canetti's view of it – play a prominent role in the third volume of the trilogy (Borch, "Foam Architecture" 555), and Sloterdijk's discussion of that work suggests that each cell in the foam is inhabited by just one individual human. So too does Sloterdijk's assertion that foam "serves to formulate a philosophical-anthropological interpretation of modern individualism that I am convinced cannot be adequately described using previously existing means. Foam theory is connected to the prospect of a new explicatory form for what sociological tradition calls the social bond or 'social synthesis' – an explanation that does beyond the classic Kantianizing question of how 'society' is possible as a collective of shareholders." (233) It hardly makes sense to say this unless Sloterdijk envisages that each cell in the foam is inhabited by just one person. Couture claims that foam theory is a mighty achievement which succeeds in "overcoming the opposition between the school of liberal individualism (contract theory) and the spiteful conservative school of holistic Romanticism (organicism). The poetics of spherology rearticulates the sense of belonging initially formulated by Romanticism, without sacrificing smaller units (couples, houses, tribes, and networks) in constituting contemporary social wholes." (104) While I agree that this appears to have been Sloterdijk's aspiration, in my view his foam theory remains far too vague on key matters of structural ontology to be considered a successful resolution of this conflict.

Foams may be untotalisable and tend toward the ungovernable in the way in which so many households in the sprawl of suburbia – as viewed from a plane, or on a town plan – can each be imagined, with a degree of postmodern latitude, to have their own distinctive inner atmosphere and 'values', even though they may readily be agglomerated into

purchasing or voting trends by the nudging forces of mass media advertising. This is all just about plausible and coherent from the top-down aerial perspective of a theorist, or administrator, in the instant in which they take their snapshot of the foam. Such foam is far less plausible as a model for contemporary intersubjectivity if you try to envisage that foam-world from the perspective of any human actually inhabiting its cells, singly or severally, over an extended period of time. From this perspective it is evident that each one of us inhabits a plurality of different cells simultaneously: even when we are sat on the sofa in the intimacy of our household cell somewhere in Europe we may be having a telephone conversation with an auntie in Goa, while watching television news images of an earthquake in China and thinking about Descartes, or chocolate cake, or both. It is even clearer that we inhabit several cells sequentially, over the course of a single day, as we move from one spatialised environmental cell to another, each of which – on one reading of Sloterdijk's account – also contains several other humans who similarly live within and move between a plurality of cells and carry with them a similar residue of affectionate and aversive attachments, or neutral associations, with that panoply of other spaces and other people. Trying to probe the foam from the perspective of those who inhabit it suggests that intersubjectivity today is not adequately captured by the foam model, which is an overridingly spatial and administrative model subject to the limitations of three-dimensional space.²

Instead of trying to resolve fundamental questions of conceptual design, questions about the basic structure of his foam model, Sloterdijk launches into a rambling reelaboration of “the anthroposphere” (338) or “anthropogenic island” (463), which summarises many of the themes from the first two volumes in nine separate characteristics or “dimensions” (338–463), as though such profusion – bring on the tap-dancing sailor – could distract attention from incoherence in the model's design. While this lengthy recapitulation does not substantively address the key interpretive questions about the ontological structure of the foam it nevertheless closes with the stark assertion that “each individual cell in the foam must now be understood as a micro-insulation that carries the complete pattern of nine-dimensionality heavily folded within itself” (463). Sloterdijk adds that “Every household, every couple, every group of resonances already form a miniature of the whole anthrotope as cells in the foam. Moreover, every cell and every association of cells, that is to say culture, is incorporated into a fluctuating variety of one-sided and reciprocal imitations, crossings and mixtures in which no homogeneous basic form can ever be identified.” (463–4) Foams are unquestionably fascinating in their spatial structure and Sloterdijk shows eloquently how their form may serve in design, architecture and urban planning; that is, wherever spatial considerations are already paramount. Yet to pretend that the bounded spatiality of their cells makes foams adequate as a social or philosophical theory of intersubjective existence is fanciful because (post-)humans today do not exist – and humans never have only existed – at just one point in space: this may be more obvious today when so much of our intersubjectivity is mediated and effortlessly spans the globe but even in the Paleolithic circle around the fire we were already imagining, or remembering, other places and other people – we existed within that spatially situated sphere and we transcended its bounds. Sloterdijk's dogmatic assertion that each cell is a replication of the complexity of the foam does not resolve the basic ambiguities in his account and does not persuade this reader that it is an adequate model, for if a cell is essentially in its complexity a microcosmic reflection, or “miniature”, of the foam in its entirety then the question still remains: what *is* a foam in this figurative sense?

Furthermore, if the cells are miniatures of the foam then why not go further and extend the foam metaphor to the personhood of the humans in the foam and see them as foaming composites of their subpersonal, or dividual, qualities? If a foam is a complex aggregate of foams, which are complex aggregates of foams (*und so weiter*) we just have a bare notion of fractal supercomplexity which is said to be spatial but which lacks any determinate spatial pattern or form. Alluring though the metaphor of foam at first appears, ultimately it leaves us with the minimal notion – the mere design – of a composite of semi-autonomous and semi-transparent co-fragile units in space. Because the foam metaphor is so slight a sketch it can be applied very widely, to describe almost any complex organic structure, but this is a weakness rather than a strength of the model. This is not, however, its main weakness. This is that while intersubjectivity today is certainly influenced by spatial form it cannot be reduced to spatial modes of cohabitation, as Sloterdijk does. To attempt to read people off their immediate spatial environment in this way is in keeping with his perspectival preference for top-down snapshots of the foam and reflects an administrative disposition which ironically prioritises the perspective of the outer world of dead externality at the expense of complex technologies of mediation which allow us to be in intersubjective contact with others, in a shared sphere of interiority, even when it may look from above as though we are neatly contained within our spatial cell. This way of looking is the obverse of the modesty of design espoused by Latour: the tyranny of design's administrative perspective.

In a 2007 interview, Sloterdijk declared: "In my most recent work, I've set about integrating psychoanalysis, the history of ideas and images, systems theory, sociology, urbanism, etc. into a metaparadigm I call General Immunology or, alternatively, Sphere Theory." (Alliez and Sloterdijk, "Living Hot, Thinking Coldly" 316) This indicates that general immunology was envisaged by Sloterdijk as a compound overarching framework (a "metaparadigm"), involving disciplinary convergence, assemblage or fusion – the plausible focus of and rationale for this convergence being intersubjectivity. I have argued that the predominance of proximate spatiality in the foam model, which prioritises an administrative top-down perspective, means it is ill-suited to accounting for the dynamic and mediated character of intersubjectivity today. Indeed, it may be that this very insufficiency of the spatialised model is what requires mimetic-imitative resonance to be introduced in order to allow for the agglomeration of different cells at a spatial distance from one another – in other words, resonance is introduced in the third volume to patch the deficiencies of the foam model, which is too dependent on spatial proximity to accurately capture contemporary intersubjectivity. As I turn now to the general ascetology of *You Must Change Your Life*, I suggest that the difficulties I have identified in the foam model that is the culmination of sphere theory, or general immunology, trouble that later book's anatomy of *Homo immunologicus*.

The general ascetology of self-optimization: no pain, no gain

The "general ascetology" of *You Must Change Your Life* [2009] envisages human beings as anthropotechnical animals engaged in "practising, or self-forming and self-enhancing behaviour" (Sloterdijk, *You Must* 6, 4). By their repetitions of practising, humans weave the "fabric" of their "symbolic immune systems and ritual shells" (3) and seek "to optimize their cosmic and immunological status" (10). Against the background of the preceding discussion,

in this section I start out from the interpretive question of the extent to which such anthropotechnical practising should be thought to take place *within* the protective shelter of an already existing immunological bubble and the extent to which, conversely and as the introductory remarks just quoted seem to imply, such anthropotechnics is essentially a matter of practising *on* or *with* the boundary of that bubble.

Sloterdijk had already suggested, in the trilogy, that human life, both individually and historically, could be thought of as the continual rending and reconstruction of immunological bubbles within “breathed, divided, torn-open and restored space” (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 1: Bubbles* 46), with the rebuilding of the bubble dependent on a “transfer” of “the integral space” (54), primordially the uterine space. There the matter of the skill, or technique, required to restore the rended shell remained largely implicit in the trilogy’s immunology, reaching expression primarily in the first volume’s lyrical evocation of the uterine “dowry of memories of the symbiotic field and its enclosing power” (54), on which humans somehow draw – but how, exactly? – as they embark on later reconstructions of their immunological spheres. In *You Must Change Your Life* Sloterdijk explicates and displaces this question of skill and seems to suggest that these symbolic immunological envelopes not only can, but should, be the object of deliberate projects of anthropotechnical enhancement. Although the language of immunology remains prominent, the emphasis has shifted from the bounded interiority of the spheroid cell in the foam-world to a picture of humans living “in the enclosure of disciplines” (Sloterdijk, *You Must* 109). With this shift comes a striking new conceptual vocabulary of verticality, of literally and figuratively ‘looking up’ to transcendent foci of aspiration, and relatedly a celebration of “the constant stimulation of the skilled by competitors” (360), whereby those who devote themselves to self-enhancement through practising inevitably pull away from the common run of humans, who “chronically excuse themselves downwards” (125): “the vast majority of people have no interest in becoming more than they are. If one investigates the average direction of their wishes, one finds that they simply want a more comfortable version of what they have” (176). Almost all of Sloterdijk’s scholarly readers see this as a hyperbolic anti-egalitarianism, as for instance Couture does in remarking on “the frighteningly concrete meaning that he wishes to give to the figure of the vertical, ascetic, high-performance, and athletic individual” (Couture, *Sloterdijk* 91). I do not disagree that the overtones of Sloterdijk’s account are troubling but he can be understood to be commenting on the way in which limited aspirations and pessimistic assessments of one’s own capacity, or more generally what is called ‘low self-esteem’, demonstrably possess their own prophetic self-efficacy. This could be shown to be compatible with radical (though not social-democratic, distributive) egalitarian thought, even though Sloterdijk himself has no interest in making such a case and seems quite relaxed about distinguishing, with a degree of petty-bourgeois triumphalism, between “winners” and “losers” (38).

How exactly does the vertically aspiring practising life function in immunological terms? The emphasis Sloterdijk places, in his celebration of the “vertical axis”, on the positive magnetizing effect of its “higher stressors” (60, 87), is tempered by a suggestion, attributed in part to Pierre de Coubertin, that religions not only inspire their devotees to aspire to self-improvement but also serve as “isolators” (91) from the enormity of the very same goals they propose by developing “protocols for regulating traffic with higher stressors and ‘transcendental’ powers” (87). In other words, positive religious asceticisms simultaneously inspire and protect, forming a shield which augments itself by being repeatedly shattered and regrown. This is in line with the general understanding of symbolic

immunology in the trilogy: “Through immune systems, learning bodies incorporate their regularly recurring stressors into themselves.” (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 3: Foams* 418) It looks as though devotees gradually ascend towards their god by repeatedly piercing the shell of their own integrity to incorporate parts of that god into themselves. That religious ascetics have often chosen to undertake such studied self-harm in secessionary spaces – monastic communities or individual cells set back in retreat from the world – could thus be understood in terms of the advantage of a surrogate shell during this delicate work, which might be described as ‘pharmacological’ in the sense that it involves ‘healing harm’, in both senses of that expression. For Iwona Janicka, Sloterdijk’s work is one of the main ingredients in her anarchist politics of radical social transformation, envisaged in terms of the mimetic spread of exemplary “good habits that produce habitable spheres” (Janicka, *Theorizing Contemporary Anarchism* 81). Her emphasis falls firmly on “the fragility of spheres that we share with others” (104) and the immunological function of bubbles and foams in enabling the development of habits “in a controlled environment” which constitute “good or bad models that will be wittingly or unwittingly imitated.” (110). Thus in Janicka’s reading, the development of better habits takes place within the protective and nurturing shelter of the immunological sphere. Compelling though her anarchist vision is in other respects, this is probably a misreading of Sloterdijk. Ascetic self-work is very clearly work *on* rather than *within* the sphere, work which inflicts a form of self-harm on an outgrown container, the wilful sabotage of a bad habit in order to stimulate growth of new and better form of enveloping protection: no pain, no gain.

Successful practising today, as Sloterdijk understands it, appears to depend to a large extent on the capacity to ignore extraneous factors – presumably including other people – in order to focus on the task at hand: “the art of ignoring is inseparable from successful experimentation – we could even say that the ability to disregard [*Vernachlässigung*] what can be disregarded distinguishes the good experimenter *lege artis*.” (Sloterdijk, *What Happened?* 39) This would effect a personal secession equivalent in function to the anchoritic or cenobitic retreat in religious times, a “recessive self-insulation” (Sloterdijk, *You Must* 227) involving the establishment of an “inner protectorate” (229) as the precondition for anthropotechnical care of the self – and Sloterdijk refers here to Michel Foucault’s derivation of these technical preconditions for care of the self from Stoicism (227).

Sloterdijk is careful not to mention the fact that there was already significant interest among postmodern management theorists in monastic ascetism (Halsall and Brown, “Askesis and Organizational Culture” 234) when he took up the topic in *You Must Change Your Life*, some of which was influenced by a minority tradition of interpretation, associated especially with François Ewald, which applied Foucault’s late work to optimize the business environment, a tradition from which most academic readers of his work in the humanities and social sciences would recoil in horror (251), if they knew of its existence. As Robert Halsall and Mary Brown note, even the language of *metanoia* had already been appropriated by “change consultants” (248) and applied in business schools as a model for the assisted self-conversion of mere institutional superiors into visionary managers. I cannot evaluate this hijacking of Foucault here but I would suggest that knowing about this undisclosed context and about what Sloterdijk will go on to say some seven years later, in *What Happened in the Twentieth Century?* [2016], should temper our understanding of the anthropotechnics outlined in *You Must Change Your Life* [2009] in two ways: with regard to spatiality and to the singularity, or plurality, of competitions. Sloterdijk seems to have realised that individual self-secession, as practised today, is unlikely to be able to be spatial,

or predominantly spatial, and that although the paradigm makes sense in the context of a single organization and identity (the ‘visionary manager’ in a business, or the virtuoso violinist in an orchestra), most people’s social lives are far more complicated because we exist in a multiplicity of different intersubjective spheres at the same time, which makes that book’s encomium to the salutary effects of competitive striving seem rather one-eyed, unduly monocontextual. One of the defining features of life under neoliberal capitalism is the simultaneous and unavoidable exposure to a manifold of different competitive, hierarchising, processes, many of these now algorithmically automated and constantly ticking away in the background; while competition in the singular may hold a certain appeal, “a world of constant, overlapping competitions” and their proliferating plurality of competitive rankings is cumulatively anxiogenic and thus, unchecked, can be presumed to inhibit effective self-enhancement in any one area (Davies, *Neoliberalism* 30). This might be thought to imply even greater need for the immunological discipline of closing off, or ignoring, extraneous variables and people. Despite the loose and backward way in which autism is generally used figuratively by Sloterdijk in the trilogy as a pejorative byword for the anti-social, what he seems to be advocating in this later work is the need for a semi-autistic, or autarkic, form of self-centred concentrated attentiveness as a precondition of the successful practising life, but needless to say he eschews the language of autism for this positive possibility. In other words, to be successful at any one thing requires deliberately deciding to be very selective in the races one chooses to run, in the influences one chooses to heed. Yet in the foam-world there is a plurality of practising subjects, each existing in what tends to be an ungovernable relationship with every other, which means that the self-secession of each individual practising subject has, multiplied across the foam, unexpected cumulative side-effects: “if virtually all domains of life become experiments, in the world of work and in that of leisure, in communities as well as in private life, the consequences can easily be gauged: every experimental zone engenders its own surroundings from disregarded variables. As a result, with the increasing consolidation of experiments, we always find that neglected zones [*die Zonen der Vernachlässigung*] increasingly overlap – with more or less severe consequences. In other words, precisely because the globalization of the pursuit of happiness leads to a widespread proliferation of experimental behavior, it must also involve an inflation of negligence.” (Sloterdijk, *What Happened?* 39) The imperative to individual self-optimization that was championed throughout *You Must Change Your Life* is here viewed with some reservation as its sociopathic and ecologically toxic cumulative side-effects are quite rightly registered but without this prompting any systematic reconsideration of the earlier work. At the very least this reserve implies – though Sloterdijk refrains from theorising – the necessity for external shock to snap self-optimizers out of the self-isolated enclosure of their practising and impel them into other spheres and on to other experiences, to begin attending to some of the variables their earlier practising disregarded; such an impetus is vital if anthropotechnical practising in the foam-world is not to equate to narrow individualism with cumulatively sociotoxic side-effects.

It may be that Sloterdijk has refrained from systematically reconsidering his earlier work in light of this recently-expressed reserve because to do so would involve tugging too hard at some of the weaker strands which hold the fabric of his thought together. In the *Spheres* trilogy it was never decisively resolved, in conceptual terms, whether there was typically one or more people in each cell of the foam that figures contemporary society but the possibility of cohabitation was left open and the gravitational orbit of the trilogy around

originary intersubjectivity tended to suppress the individualist possibility of one cell per person, which nevertheless remained as conceptually coherent and plausible as its alternative. Sloterdijk's alleged *Kehre*, from intersubjectivity to individualism, with *You Must*, in fact describes the much more strident assertion of the individualist conception of life in the foam-world that was already present in the trilogy but eclipsed by the countervailing emphasis there on originary intersubjectivity. In analytical terms, if as I have argued it is clear that anthropotechnical practising takes place *on* the boundaries of the cells of the foam, assuming that each cell is inhabited by one person and given that one of the characteristics of foam is the 'co-fragility' of its cells, then any individual's self-isolated practising must be presumed to have knock-on effects on other people: if I am piercing my shell to regrow a better one then the foam-world's structure of co-fragility implies that I am simultaneously inflicting violence on the protective envelopes inhabited by others. Putting together general immunology with general ascetology accordingly suggests that if Sloterdijk's global vision of contemporary society is correct then it must also be suffused with violent social antagonism. Since the scenario preferred by Sloterdijk, of one ascetic practiser engaged in one competition at a time, is a misleadingly idealised singular snapshot of the plural overlapping competitions characteristic of life under neoliberal capitalism, the conclusion seems unavoidable that the foam-world of self-enhancers is shot through with antagonistic social violence. I am not criticizing Sloterdijk on this point since in many respects this strikes me as how life under neoliberal capitalism really operates – those who feel the pain seldom enjoy the gain – but it is unfortunate, in my view, that his work does not more fully acknowledge and more systematically explore the cumulatively violent and toxic social obverse of individualised ascetological practising. Instead, the vision of individualized self-optimization he proposes in *You Must* is far too similar to the myth of the heroic entrepreneur, one of the sustaining fantasies of neoliberal capitalism.

Conclusion: coming unstuck and becoming unstuck

I have argued that there are significant conceptual weaknesses in Sloterdijk's theoretical models both of spheric general immunology and of practising general ascetology, weaknesses which can be grasped by carefully considering each individually and which become especially vexed when the two are conjoined: the overall architecture of Sloterdijk's project quickly comes unstuck. When exposed to the type of critical-analytical scrutiny which he so pugnaciously repels, the work breaks down into an agglomeration of perspicuous local observations, a profusion of details and rhetorical flourishes from which no overarching coherent systematic conceptual sense can be made.

I have argued that foam is too spatial and administrative a model to adequately capture human intersubjectivity; I also pointed out that on crucial points of ontological structure Sloterdijk's design for the foam-model is frustratingly ambiguous and sketchy. In particular, whether each cell in the foam today can, or typically does, contain just one individual remains unclear. Nevertheless, I have shown that: (i) there is no *Kehre* between Sloterdijk's general immunology and general ascetology because the individualist possibility was already present in the *Spheres* trilogy as one of two plausible understandings of the foam-world, but in that trilogy it was conjoined with a lyrical countervailing emphasis on originary intersubjectivity which tended distract attention from that individualist reading – in *You Must Change Your Life* intersubjectivity is absent, which leads some readers to think

he has turned into an individualist; (ii) in *You Must* the practising subject self-enhances by rending its own protective envelope and rebuilding a better and stronger one; (iii) since Sloterdijk has not explicitly repudiated or significantly qualified the account given of cells in the foam as co-fragile, it follows that individual practising in the foam-world is never wholly individual but must always also involve rending other people's protective envelopes; (iv) although Sloterdijk's idealised focus in *You Must* is narrowly on the individual practising subject engaged in a singular struggle, isolated later remarks suggest he is aware that there must be cumulatively toxic and violent social side-effects of singular acts of self-enhancement; (v) his reluctance to think about the violence of social antagonism implied by anthropotechnical practising in the foam-world is consistent with the way his general ascetology of individual self-optimization mimics neoliberal capitalism's sustaining fantasy of heroic self-entrepreneurship but neglecting to consider the intersubjective downside of individual success does not automatically dispense with the question of equality; (vi) the idea that successful practising involves a degree of autistic self-closure to other variables in the social world also implies the need for a motive force to bring practising individuals out of their self-absorption, to move them on to other spheres and other struggles but this motive force is also left untheorised.

The difficulty in reading Sloterdijk arises more between than within his works, in part because he never goes back over his own earlier theoretical practising to explicitly reconsider it in a sustained discussion, though he often makes allusions to earlier work which convey an impression of continuity. There are few regrets, self-corrections or second thoughts, or few are expressed. His work actively repels critique: 'The scenery of the critical intelligentsia is [...] populated by aggressive and depressive moralists, problematists, "problemaholics", and soft rigorists whose predominant existential stimulus is *No*.' (Sloterdijk, *Critique* 126) Even if, on close analysis, the design of his theoretical models is more flawed and less coherent than first appears to be the case, I can still find reason to admire his undertaking, independently of this rather menacing preemptive strike. I accordingly end with Sloterdijk's own troubling tribute to cynical-kynical resourcefulness, which extolls "the outsmartable nature of resistances, the bypassable nature of obstacles, the postponable nature of difficulties, the reframable nature of deficiencies, the contestable nature of recriminations, the reformulable nature of accusations, the manipulable nature of standards, the subvertible nature of tasks, the replaceable nature of losses, the numbable nature of pain and the avoidable nature of head-on encounters with forces that can only bring defeat." (Sloterdijk, *Spheres 3: Foams* 689) It seems churlish to close with gripes about the coherence of Sloterdijk's overall project, to cling to its continuity errors and design flaws without acknowledging that the relentless forward motion of his writing and its sphere-forming capacity is its own extraordinary achievement. To wish to see Sloterdijk turning around himself in eddies of self-doubt would be to scorn the tonic potential of his work and to refuse to consider, in the sheer ambition of its irrepressible and sometimes irresponsible forward motion – its brazen effrontery, even – its compelling anthropotechnical lesson in becoming unstuck. Watching that work unfold is rather like watching Guido and Fellini becoming creatively unstuck by their own practising, making the film from the very inability to make the film. All the better if the impetus of Sloterdijk's example resonates through the foam to draw people out of their self-isolated spheres of practising, encouraging them to work free of self-stifling hesitancy and the enervating downward pull of too-modest expectations or the imagined obligations to past unhappiness and injury: "The unkindnesses of yesterday compel you to nothing." (Sloterdijk, *Critique* 547)

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¹ I borrow the image of the ants on the carpet from Sloterdijk (*What Happened?* 43), who in turn borrowed it from Rumi.

² It may be that the foam model could be developed to better capture the reality of contemporary intersubjectivity by allowing the foam to froth over into other dimensions of space, in the way that mathematical models of networks of association of the sort frequently deployed at the commercial and military forefronts of "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff) commonly do.