Book Review


In 2011, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom invited the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk to give a speech on freedom. This small book (57 pages), with footnotes and a short index, is the result. In recent years Sloterdijk has been breaking into the consciousness of the Anglosphere through the solid translations of Wieland Hoban. Sloterdijk’s impactful Du mußt dein Leben andern/You Must Change Your Life was translated by Hoban in 2013, and the philosopher’s chef-d’œuvre—the Spheres/Bubbles/Foam project—is now being translated. The first two volumes of the three-part series are presently available in English. Each of these texts will have a substantial impact on the methodology of Religious Studies because of their deep engagement with sociology, constructivism, and ideas of personal transformation. But while Hoban’s translations are being completed, Stress and Freedom is an interesting short text that allows a fairly painless entrée into Sloterdijk’s thinking and his style.

Sloterdijk starts by noting the absence of astonishment in the Social Sciences and wonders why the humanities are driven by such a cold matter-of-factness. He does so to admit that he himself is completely and honestly in awe of the fact that modern national structures are able to remain cohesive despite deep problems with subjectivity, individualism, and the mythic quest for freedom. He discusses the nature of this cohesion as a matter of ‘stress concerns’—that is, points of contention in a particular society that hold it together despite the viciousness of the contention. Sloterdijk’s definition of nation could be used as a way of considering a range of social groups including religious communities:

…a nation is a collective that succeeds in jointly keeping uncalm. Within it, a constant, varyingly intense flow of stress topics must ensure the synchronisation of consciousness in order to integrate the respective population into a community of concern and excitation that regenerates from day to day. (p. 7)

It is against these ‘suggestions of outrage, envy or presumption, a wealth of offers directed at the sentimentality, willingness for fear and indiscretion of the shareholders’ (p. 7) that Sloterdijk begins to discuss freedom.

He starts by problematising more ancient concepts of freedom such as the Greek term eleutheria, and investigates the outrage, via the rape of Lucretia, that leads to Roman freedom through the establishment of the republic. He does this to mark a division between these ideals and the concept of ‘freedom’ as it manifested as a key platform of modernity. To delineate this particular concept of modern freedom, he points to the Fifth Walk of Rousseau’s Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire (1778) where, Sloterdijk avers, the modernist subjectivity was first revealed.
The author [Rousseau] does not claim to be close to God or transported to a Third Heaven; the subject’s first words are ones of self-disclosure. He declares that this subject discovered itself in an ecstasy of being-with-oneself—and that it has nothing else to say. By experiencing the feeling of pure existence, it believes it has acquired a sovereign title of being. (p. 21)

This battle between a perfect kind of Rousseauian subjectivity and ‘the real’—as Sloterdijk defines the practicalities of the stress-communities within which we live—forms the basis of the analysis of the remainder of the book. It is a battle that Sloterdijk believes has still not been resolved, and it is one in which ‘the real’ is complicated now by its reformation as the opposite to the subjective as ‘the objective’—although the philosopher is very wary of this term as anything but a modernist expression.

The immediate relation Sloterdijk’s argument has to the study of religion is his depiction of new and ‘comfortable’ religions joining forces with therapeutic professions and others as being agents of ‘radical relaxation’ (pp. 31-35). In seeking ‘freedom from stress’, these organisations develop a ‘subjective contamination’ (p. 36) that threatens the ‘reality’ of our national ‘stress communities’. This comes through even more evidently in Sloterdijk’s paralleling of Scientology and the International Olympic movement as one finds it discussed in You Must Change Your Life.

In the end, Sloterdijk defines his kind of freedom as a form of nobility. It is the space—mentally and socially—where humans can raise themselves from that which is deemed ‘necessary’ to a different plane of behaviour: ‘freedom is availability for the improbable’ (p. 54), he concludes.

There is an argument that the discipline of philosophy has little that is original in it at the present moment. In a way, Stress and Freedom confirms this. Reading Sloterdijk, one finds a voice melding the philosophical tradition with concerns that were powerfully alive in Sociology from the 1950s to the 1970s. This little book covers the kind of ground that the likes of Berger, Luckmann, and Goffman trod decades before. This does not, however, make his thinking on these older issues any less fascinating; in fact, he provides a noble way towards rethinking them, and by extension, how we might rethink religion.

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