

can operate virtuously. Machiavelli, on this reading, offers a dialectical philosophy that is at odds with what has gone before, though it draws upon philosophical tradition. It is against elitist Platonic politics, Aristotelian teleology, the providentialism of Polybius and a restricted classical republicanism that excludes the people. Machiavelli embraces instead a conflictual structure of reality that allows for populism in drawing upon the Epicurean vision of Lucretius rather than Aristotelianism and classical republicanism.

Reading Machiavelli as a dialectical theorist allows for an appreciation of his realist and transformative political philosophy. Politics can be read dialectically in the past and in the present because supposed universal moral truths do not stand aside from the changing shapes of political realities. Moreover Del Lucchese's reading incorporates a considered appreciation of historic readings of Machiavelli. Machiavelli's dialectical appreciation of agency, change and difference is shown to align with aspects of many subsequent commentaries. Del Lucchese weaves several interpretations of Machiavelli around the story that he tells. Hence he makes sense of Hegel's identification of Machiavelli's nationalism and of Strauss's recognition of Machiavelli's originality, and shows how Althusser and Gramsci can perceive their own dialectical forms of Marxism to be prefigured in Machiavelli. Questions, however, can be asked of Del Lucchese's rereading of Machiavelli concerning, for instance, the influence of Lucretius on Machiavelli, which is crucial for the book's depiction of Machiavelli as a metaphysician. Of course influence is an elusive, tricky concept with which to deal, and what we are offered here does not render the concept any less elusive than usual. We are not presented with evidence of an exceptional and emphatic engagement with Lucretius on the part of Machiavelli. Rather, Machiavelli is held to have read Lucretius early in his life, and key passages in his texts are held to reflect or mirror Lucretius. In Del Lucchese's interpretation of Machiavelli, his instrumentalism tends to be played down along with the influence of classical humanism and Ancient republicanism. Machiavelli, however, does draw upon Renaissance republicanism and he offers sharp and provocative commentary on how a politician can break with moral sentiments. The story that is told by the Cambridge School is not simply wrong even if it is one-sided, just as Leo Strauss has a point in calling Machiavelli 'evil'. Machiavelli is prepared to play a very tough political game in which the innocent might be killed.

Interpretations of classic political theorists are inevitably partial. Texts are shaped by the ways in which they are interpreted. Texts and contexts are neither self-producing nor reducible to the inspiration of a classic author or the force of a set of circumstances. What we can ask of an interpretation is that it offers a stimulating and plausible reading of past texts so that we appreciate how the conceptual world of a past thinker relates to the world with which it is aligned. We also want to get to grips with what a past thinker has to say that is of ongoing significance for political reality and philosophical speculation. In this regard, Del Lucchese's reading of Machiavelli is an exemplary interpretation. It is a highly readable and engaging account of Machiavelli that is both scholarly and plausible. Importantly, it shows how Machiavelli has much to say about the practice of politics and the nature of historical developments in the early modern, and indeed the late modern, world. This is more than enough to be going on with.

Gary Browning

More amour propre

Peter Sloterdijk, *Stress and Freedom*, trans. Wieland Hoban, Polity Press, Cambridge and Malden MA, 2015. 80 pp., £35.00 hb., £9.99 pb., 978 0 74569 928 8 hb., 978 0 74569 929 5 pb.

In his *Philosophy of Mind*, Hegel declares that 'No Idea is so generally recognized as indeterminate, ambiguous, and open to the greatest misconceptions, to which therefore it actually falls prey, as the Idea of *freedom*, and no Idea is in common circulation with so little consciousness of it.' Hegel's motif aptly applies to Peter Sloterdijk's new book. Sloterdijk's book *Stress and Freedom* is something of a bombastic oddity, which seeks to conceive freedom not as an agent's autonomy, or right to self-determination, but rather as an act of withdrawal from the social. The book, which is based on a speech Sloterdijk gave at the Berlin Speeches on Freedom in 2011, is a short meditation on the interconnectedness of freedom and stress. It is the relation between these two concepts which allows Sloterdijk to argue for an account of freedom as the freedom to flee from the social sphere of human existence. Sloterdijk's aim is to provide an ostensibly innovative conception of individual freedom that is predicated on an immunological conception of society. Society for Sloterdijk is a stress-generating

machine. His attempt, while certainly theoretically interesting, results in a hideous reactionary politics.

The political implications of Sloterdijk's text on freedom are not unlike Heidegger's preoccupation with the fundamental ontological question of Being qua being. One is here reminded of Adorno's reproach to Heidegger in *Negative Dialectics*:

Metaphysical reflections that seek to get rid of their cultural, indirect elements deny the relation of their allegedly pure categories to their social substance. They disregard society, but encourage its continuation in existing forms, in the forms which in turn block both the cognition of truth and its realization.

While Sloterdijk does not encourage the continuation of society in its existing form, he does argue for a conception of freedom which purposefully severs the individual's link to society. For Sloterdijk, rather than seeking to collectively change the material conditions of society, his proposed solution is to construct a concept of freedom that privileges the individual, rather than the collective. Freedom, for Sloterdijk, is the freedom to retreat from the social.

From the outset of the book, Sloterdijk's resentment of collective and shared existence is evident. For example, he defines individualism as 'the life form that loosens the embeddedness of individuals in collectives, and questions the seemingly immemorial absolutism of the shared by assigning to every single human the dignity of being absolutely *sui generis*'. He claims that 'the large-scale political bodies we call societies should be understood primarily as stress-integrated force fields, or more precisely as self-stressing care systems constantly hurtling ahead.' Sloterdijk's thesis is that human societies operate by generating stress on a mass scale. Societies are only able to exist in so far as they maintain a certain level of unease among their inhabitants. Modern media outlets, capitalism's unmitigated productive force, the exploitation of workers, and so on – all of these factors of contemporary social life stress us out. Sloterdijk is confident about this definition of society because he argues that the very stability of society is not guaranteed; a point he takes to be proved by the prevalence of the word 'sustainability' in the dominant cultural discourse. Our obsession with creating a more sustainable way of life is not incidental, Sloterdijk claims; it is rather a reaction to, and a symptom of, the inherent restlessness of our modern world. Hence, societies are to be understood as stress-inducing 'force fields' that surround its inhabitants completely.

Sloterdijk's inspiration for his conception of freedom is mainly found in Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. This is the focus of the second section of the book. In this seldom-read text, Rousseau describes his walking experience in 1776–77 on St Peter's Island in the middle of Lake Biel. It is the entry for the 'Fifth Walk' which fascinates Sloterdijk. There, Rousseau gives his contemplative account of experiencing a state of solitude so refined that all earthly and social pressures dissolve and momentarily wither away. Sloterdijk refers to this as the 'freedom of a dreamer in a waking state'. For Sloterdijk, then, Rousseau's experience ushers in a new understanding of freedom, which refers

to a state of exquisite unusability in which the individual is entirely with themselves, but mostly detached from their everyday identity. In the freedom of the reverie, the individual is far removed from 'society', but also detached from their own person as woven into the social fabric. They leave both things behind: the world of collective themes of concern and themselves as part of it. Hence an individual becomes free through the conquest of carefreeness.

This carefree subject, according to Sloterdijk, is one without any objective purpose, creative endeavour or political opinion. It is a subject with nothing to say or do. Sloterdijk's free subject is useless, and that's the entire point. To be useful presupposes some connection to the social dimension of human existence, and Sloterdijk's withdrawn subject flees from this exact connection.

If modern societies are nothing but stress-generators, then Rousseau's discovery is the only form of temporary relief available. Sloterdijk acknowledges that there are two general types of unfreedom: (i) political oppression; and (ii) repression by a reality that is external to the subject. Unsurprisingly, Sloterdijk spends little time contemplating the first form of unfreedom and mostly focuses on the second. He draws upon Lacan's concept of 'the Real' to suggest that the modern social order is inherently oppressive, traumatic and seemingly inescapable, save for the flash of freedom discovered by Rousseau: 'the subjectivity released while fleeing from pursuit by the real – the pure feeling of existence removed from all topics – reached, just this once, the pole of complete freedom from stress.'

Sloterdijk thinks that in our contemporary situation we can neither live in absolute carefreeness as a withdrawn subject nor dismiss Rousseau's discovery. Where the individual experience of withdrawnness

is concerned, Sloterdijk demonstrates a characteristically reactionary attitude towards collective forms of political action. Repeating an all-too-pervasive neo-liberal trope, he claims that Rousseau's concept of the General Will, famously formulated in *The Social Contract*, 'was the logical nucleus of the socialist fascisms that dueled against their nationalist rivals during the twentieth century'. He goes on to assert that this only

proves that even distinguished thinkers do not always gain their most far-reaching insights in the right order. Rousseau should have retracted his doctrine of *volonté générale* in light of his experience in Lake Biel. His failure to do so was disastrous for the modern world, in which nothing is as irresistible as a wrong idea in the heads that seem only to have been waiting for it.

What follows this attack on the general will is a haphazard and hasty link between the Reign of Terror and the Chinese and Russian revolutions. Indeed, for Sloterdijk 'the deeds of the Khmer Rouge likewise had undeniable Rousseauist origins', and 'Gaddafi's Libyan socialism brought to light aspects of the phantasm that the will of the whole should be unanimous.'

Analogous to Heidegger's account of authentic Dasein, Sloterdijk claims that the experience of the fleeing or released subject

never maintains the stance of inaccessibility to the real in the long term. As soon as it discovers its freedom, it simultaneously discovers a virtually boundless accessibility within itself to calls from the real. Because of its availability, which reaches a maximum by disengaging inwards, it independently finds its way back into the objective – provided it is not kept within a false I-construct by neurosis, as was the case with Rousseau.

Sloterdijk concludes the book with an appeal to the noble disposition of the free subject. The free subject is noble because it is committed to alleviating the stress of others through virtuous acts of generosity, for 'whoever acts out of freedom revolts against meanness they can no longer bear to see.' This 'meanness' includes both political oppression and the repressive nature of reality. Curiously enough, Sloterdijk calls his theory of freedom a type of liberalism, one that is 'a synonym for generosity'.

Stress and Freedom abides by Sloterdijk's philosophical project, his *Spheres* trilogy, in that he advances an understanding of society that is decidedly immunological. Society is not only stressful, but it will continue to create and disseminate stressors. The

only solace from social stress is a form of individual freedom that borders on the ascetic and the aristocratic. But by opposing the concept of freedom as the collective right to self-determination, Sloterdijk's thesis reinforces the most reactionary tendencies of the status quo. Gone are any attempts at restructuring or refashioning the economic order and our social institutions, gone is the demand for universal emancipation by way of altering our material conditions, and, perhaps most dangerously of all, gone is the *idea* of freedom as self-determination, the very germ of radical emancipation itself.

Borna Radnik

Ugh

Frederick Neuhouser, *Rousseau's Critique of Inequality: Reconstructing the Second Discourse*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014. 236 pp., £47.99 hb., £18.99 pb., 978 1 10706 474 4 hb., 978 1 10764 466 3 pb.

Rousseau's *Second Discourse* is long and intricate – some would say even tortuous – and first-time readers often get lost. In my experience (having taught the text for a number of years), part of the problem is recognizing the kind of argument that Rousseau mounts, or even recognizing that there is an argument at all, rather than a general polemic against the ills of civilization. A frequent and wholly understandable complaint from students is that Rousseau appears to assert different and even contradictory claims at different points in the text. What exactly is Rousseau saying about inequality? Is the focus of the text inequality or is this only a landmark en route to a more fundamental problem: the possibility of autonomy or authenticity in the modern world? To compound matters, there is the purported influence of the work on figures like Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Adorno and Horkheimer. If the *Second Discourse* is an important source for works like *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, *The 1844 Manuscripts*, *The Genealogy of Morals* and *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, then it should be possible not just to trace this influence but to develop an authentically Rousseauian standpoint to compare and contrast with these seminal statements on modernity. If any text in the canon deserves painstaking reconstruction, then it is surely this one.

Frederick Neuhouser's background in German Idealism greatly facilitates his achievement in *Rousseau's*

Stress and Freedom book. Read 4 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. In this short book Peter Sloterdijk offers a genealogy of the con...
Peter Sloterdijk is a German philosopher, cultural theorist, television host and columnist. He is a professor of philosophy and media theory at the University of Art and Design Karlsruhe. Peter Sloterdijk studied philosophy, Germanistics and history at the University of Munich.
Since 1980 he has published many philosophical works, Peter Sloterdijk is a German philosopher, cultural theorist, television host and columnist. He is a professor of philosophy and media theory at the University of Art and Design Karlsruhe. Peter Sloterdijk studied philosophy, Germanistics and history at the University of Munich.