

## STEPS BACK

In a recent book by Peter Sloterdijk entitled *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals: für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung*,<sup>1</sup> the name Husserl appears at a certain point next to what is to be called the “doctrine of the *epoché*”, which constitutes one of the aspects of major importance of phenomenology. The reference to *epoché* is not merely thematic; it instead fulfils a simple exemplary function and, as an exception, is almost completely extrinsic to the theoretical questions implicated in the so-called doctrine. The *epoché*, this time, indicates a sort of “resistance”, a going against the current compared to the progressive nature of the movement that characterizes what Sloterdijk calls, relative to this philosophical episode, “everything else” or, as an approximation, everything, the whole, the world, humanity in its now global and self-globalizing totality. “The task of reflection”, which Sloterdijk prefaced a few lines to, “consists of predisposing desired disinhibitions”. By this, meaning, along with “everything else”, that reflection, too, now finds itself at the service of a wide-spread and unlimited action (but not for this lacking a specific finality) which Sloterdijk in his most recent and successful work, describes, in a good deal of passages, the motivations, the provenance, and current as well as ostensibly future effects. For reflection, then, there would be no other function than to ease individual disinhibition (singular-

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals: für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 2005.

ly or collectively understood) to give in to it. It is about a vision of our current situation, here we can only summarily draw the outline, of contemporaneity; in this situation, nothing (or almost nothing) that detracts from the totality in progressive movement of the action, seems to be tolerated. Not even one thing from the order of the “principle” of this same action, since it is about an action in the name of action itself, of an action that lacks any type of motivation or external starting point, which each inhibition or hesitation of a reflective character would be an obstacle. And inside of this type of vortex, only some thing would seem to be able to resist. Here are the words which Sloterdijk uses to delineate the situation:

The dominant figure of Modernity is absolutely not, therefore, the excess of inner reflection as some authors have suggested, nor is it a halting inhibition which it achieves: rather, it is a pragmatic indecision, which mainly arrives within an observable period of time, independent of whether alone or with others. It becomes manifest that the task of reflection consists of predisposing desired disinhibitions. Only in rare and exceptional cases does thought of the Modernity have the function of procrastinating the action on the basis of principle, we can for the rest conclude that in modern times, nothing is more improbable than the attitude of contemplative philosophy. This does not mean refuting the fact that at the beginning of the xxth century phenomenologists after Husserl, with their doctrine of the *epoché*, knew how to show how to use this action; the “step back” made possible for philosophy is made explicit precisely at the moment in which everything else is concentrated on steps forward.<sup>2</sup>

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This type of description from passages which are otherwise authoritative, is not up for discussion here. We can also accredit it in the further proposed images, those for example of a theory that is no longer conceived as a static contemplation of the thinker but as an “active construction of sufficient, successful motivations”<sup>3</sup> and so on. I would like to stop a moment on what is now already appearing as a double character in philosophy. Or at least of a certain way of acting in and through “theory”, a kind of “making theory”. Or, what seems an inescapable finding oneself again at the service of a more ample, imperious and unmanageable action and, along with that (maybe in this implicit?) capacity of resistance, of subtraction, of self-exclusion of the action that reminded Sloterdijk of the gesture of the *epoché*, his teacher, the students of that teacher, at least the most important ones: surely Heidegger, evoked in the “steps back”, but surely also others and maybe even in more recent generations.

2 Ivi, Chap. xi.

3 Ibidem.

It is in question, then, a sort of capability, of potential of resistance of a philosophical gesture like that in the *epoché* and, especially beyond its thematic or critical content. A gesture that was not established for motivations of this kind. It is certainly not for creating resistance, or flux in the countertrend compared to certain planetary drifts that Husserl inaugurated, in phenomenology, in his phenomenology, this way of proceeding. At least at first there is nothing further from his intentions. Even if, as noted, in later texts, in particular those collected in *Krisis*, clarifying some “European” (a term that could equal “global” or “worldly” today) tendencies relative to the sciences and to the crisis of their total tendency is faced with great preoccupation. But it is not about assuming a position relative to action; the struggle, if that is what it is about, is fought in the area of knowledge; even, we can say, with those who are defined as “functionaries of humanity”. It is on this plane that, according to Husserl, destiny plays a role, at his time European, of every knowledge and consequently of each action.

The brief observation of Sloterdijk, seemingly inessential because it is deliberately exemplary and in that way also gratuitous, has in any case the merit of unhinging this order and state of things in a strong and efficient manner. The *epoché* mentioned in the example no longer seems a gesture that derives its own specificity in a philosophical area and has a relatively precise theoretical context, but indicates instead how a certain type of philosophy or potentially all philosophy, specifies itself as an explicit and almost thematic countermovement compared to “everything else”, which, in its totality, is confirmed more and more in the tendency towards progress, as fast as it is wide-spread and vice versa. Relative to the texts of Sloterdijk, it is not about a fleeting consideration and even less a sort of *hapax*. In his writing, at least in those most directly theoretical,<sup>4</sup> the shifting of the philosophical from the context of “knowledge” to a context where this would enter directly into a relationship (of subordination?) with action, is particularly explicit, visible and at times insistent.

But it is neither necessary nor indispensable to credit this operation to the presumed and explicit intention of the author. No one disregards the fact that we find ourselves in the presence of a remodelling of philosophy in light of a series of considerations that concern the area of anthropology, or a vast and radical rethinking of the internal philosophy of anthropological coordinates or of anthropological derivations; on the other hand, such a total plan may, at least temporarily, be stopped and ignored. Because what seems to follow more closely, beyond the “explanations” or the theoretical constructions even if wide-ranging (which

4 As well as *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals*, see Peter Sloterdijk, *Nicht gerettet. Versuche nach Heidegger*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 2001.

are recognized by Sloterdijk without reservations like the rest), is rather the distinguishing of the symptom. The symptom that would indicate a drift from the “philosophical” (of quote obligation, implicit are various instances not necessarily in harmony among themselves: the scientific or meta-scientific, the reflective, the critical and still others) towards an anthropological or anthropogenetic root. This means that if becoming a man from man is nothing other than a process linked to action,<sup>5</sup> the action itself takes its place in a sort of original position from which characteristics and human faculties including language, truth, thought etc., would derive, to be considered secondary elements or derivatives or simply tools.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the relevance of questions in terms of “origin” or to a chronology of the acquisition of abilities and skills, the fact of reconsidering the “philosophical” in light of the “anthropological” would contribute (or would have contributed) to lead almost in a sort of epochal or destined fulfilment, to a sooner or later definitive subordination of the “philosophical”, like action, to its job and for the “steps forward” of an action that would be indispensable or only useful, a series of systems able to carry out an inhibitorial or disinhibitorial function relative to the opportunities of undertaking an action. In a similar context, any kind of undertaking would therefore be traceable to ends and purposes, to “usefulness” or “advantage”. A prospective not unlike that proposed in some of the works of Nietzsche for which a biologicalist perspectivism, where conditions of preservation and enhancement the living count most of all,<sup>7</sup> would obviously be a foundation of the conscious action of man.

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In a similar context, the “step back” that, according to Sloterdijk, is completed with the gesture of the *epoché* would clarify or make more “explicit” how much is “made possible for philosophy”. It is then necessary to ask: How is it possible that in a situation which, in its totality, is “concentrated on steps forward” philosophy would be conceded a sort of extraterritoriality or surprising immunity? Or a type of escape route? And, precisely when, as Sloterdijk observes several times,

5 See *Nicht gerettet*, Chap. III.

6 In *Nicht gerettet*, Chap. III, we can see how explicit is Sloterdijk about this subject; he affirms that “the look that follows the throw of a stone is the first form of a theory”, that “the feeling of getting the target [...] is the first degree of a post-animal function of truth”, that “to hit the target is the primitive form of the sentence. The successful throw is the first synthesis of subject (stone), copula (action) and object (animal or enemy)”, that in “the actions of throwing, hitting and cutting [...] the truth is *originally* read as correctness” and finally, according to these comments, “language is only the second house of being”.

7 For example, see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Kröner, Leipzig 1911, § 715: “The standpoint of ‘value’ is the standpoint of conditions of preservation and enhancement for complex forms of relative life-duration within the flux of becoming”; this is only one of the several examples we can find in Nietzsche’s work, in which this kind of thought is affirmed.

the “theory” is no longer understood as an “attitude of contemplative calm of the thinker faced with the icons of being”, but as an “active construction of motivations sufficient for successful actions?”<sup>8</sup> Definitively, it would not be about a prerogative conceded to that which, all things considered, becomes unimportant and for that reason uninfluential. It would instead be about depriving oneself of a real resource relative to the disinhibitions turned to action, not at all, therefore, a negligible or irrelevant resource of little importance.

It would be difficult for an answer, even a thoughtful and articulated one, to come from pretending there is a sort of concession by decree for some individuals and their occupations in virtue of their non-dangerous position, or of an even less belligerent behaviour not capable of actively damaging that “everything” concentrated “on steps forward”. Also because, for “everything else”, that is part of the whole, any privation of a resource is a direct threat, in the sense that it is a empowering of the same “whole”, and therefore endangers the overwhelming and unstoppable character of what constitutes its own end. On the other hand, I do not believe as do others, that the “step back made possible for philosophy” could mean through personal initiative and self-determination deciding to subtract oneself from an environment that is the environment itself of his survival, his life, his own action; and that to dedicate oneself to a kind of counter-action, of counter-action, represented and exemplified in the “attitude of contemplative philosophy”. As if one had a way of organizing a kind of resistance, in terms of “thought” as well as in terms of “life conduct” in a kind of quasi asceticism.

Perhaps the answer could be found in another direction. And, maybe, what is “made possible for philosophy” should not be read in terms of something that is conceded to “philosophy” from the outside, whether it is a question of outside represented by that everything else subtracted from the totality that is “concentrated on steps forward”, or a question of that outside, maybe closer but still extrinsic portrayed by the behavioural initiative (even if supported by ethical, pragmatic, psychological etc. motivations) of one or more individuals determined to create a sort of extraterritoriality or immunity or escape route compared to a totality that is decidedly more powerful and determined not to deprive itself of human or, even less, of “theoretical” resources, that is, in the sense that we have seen, the motivational one. Why then should something like a subtraction from totality, from a determined whole motivated to dominate through more and more disinhibited and efficient action, be made possible for “philosophy”? If it is not a question of privilege, if a convincing response cannot come from extrin-

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8 P. Sloterdijk, *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals: für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung*, Chap. XI.

sic motives and characteristics in the “philosophical” area, the question must be turned inwards, to philosophy itself.

A step of this kind, that is, to have asked a question about the strange and at first incomprehensible extraterritoriality of “philosophy” compared to the “whole” of the “steps forward”, is perhaps able to point to a sort of answer. Not so much a theoretical answer as an answer of the clinical kind to say: “philosophy”, whether or not represented by the *epoché*, would seem able to subtract from something; not something determined; but from the totality itself; in “philosophical” terms we could translate: it would be able to subtract itself from the being in its totality in its being and becoming. Said like this, the thing seems decidedly relevant, to the point that it could almost lead us to a sort of gigantomachy to prepare in epic keys. In effect, however, there is none of this, nor should a definition of “philosophy” constructed in these terms, as a capacity, a possibility of subtraction from the being of its totality, in its being and in its becoming, be surprising. In fact, a similar description or definition of “philosophy” could be okay for any époque, for any moment, for any gesture relative to the being in its totality, in its being and becoming that is not a priori traceable to this same totality. The same thinkability of the being, in itself and its totality, in its being and becoming, expresses an outward appearance, that which seems to be what is “made possible for philosophy”.

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Maybe you sense a heideggerian atmosphere. This is not an accident, and not only because of the assiduous presence of that “step back” with which Sloterdijk indicates that which for “philosophy” is “made possible”. But probably for the fact that in this discourse there are notions put into play, even if not at all explicit, that have something to do with Heidegger. This does not exclude the exemplary references to the *epoché*, a philosophical gesture which is surely not very close to the theoretical intentions and sensibilities of Heidegger, but is in any case useful to indicate a precise question that surely has more to do with him. It is the question that has been alluded to of “outwardness” or “extraterritoriality” of philosophy compared to a notion like that of the totality of the being, which can overlap with the notion of the globalized world, as it definitely happens in these analyses of Sloterdijk.

In that way, Husserl, when he takes up of the gesture of the Cartesian *cogito* already outlines a sort of annihilation of the mundane dimension, a *Weltvernichtung* that, far from aiming at a negation of existence in the worldly sense, presents a sort of leak of the *ego* from the mundane dimension. As for it not being the exact task of the gesture of the *epoché*, in none of its articulations does such a gesture in any case seem to act as an index, even less of a possibility of a

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“leak”. And for the rest, in terms of a “possibility”, Sloterdijk mentions it as well. But relative to the distinguishing of such a “possibility” and its reintroduction on an even more radical plane, some of Heidegger’s observations are even more efficient and authoritative; I am referring, although it may seem paradoxical, to the observations about character of being-in-the-world that are brought to light by Heidegger in the analysis of existence. It is surely not possible to talk in detail about these analyses, but it should be sufficient to bring to light a fundamental implication that is involved in our relationship with the world understood in the terms of being-in-the-world. It is the fact that expression does not mean our being closed in or contained in the world and “present” and “subsisting” *into* this, but that the opposite is true, that our relationship with the world is in terms of an opening, that is, and always of a transcendence.<sup>9</sup> Transcendence, or outwardness, relative to the world in which we do not stop being, even if through diverse modalities: from a maximum of coincidence with its objectivity in the situation that Heidegger defines with the term “inauthentic existence” to the modality in which is manifest the character of opening to the world itself. That in brief, man has the possibility to consider his “belonging” to the world differently than belonging to any object (that by definition can only find itself in the sense of the world itself as a place of objectivity) is how much Heidegger does not tire of showing, in the early pages of his work *Being and Time*, the definition of the being as “*pure and simple transcendens*”.<sup>10</sup>

There is no need to continue in this direction, inside Heidegger’s thought. This is certainly not about refuting the affirmations of one with those of another or vice versa. It is also in no way to refute Sloterdijk when he affirms that “for philosophy” is “made possible” a “step back”, but it is about the opposite of confirming these intuitions, maybe trying to support it and accredit it further with other considerations. Or simply, trying to clarify that verb, or, better, the subject of the verb, the subject of the verb “to make”, the subject of the proposition in which something like a “step back” is “made possible” for that which we call “philosophy”. And if something similar, an even partial release of the total movement of everything which is from its progress in determined directions imposed by planetary conjuncture, because of which, have empowered the force of inertia which is included, obviously, its own progress, is possible for “philosophy”, it is probably only in virtue of “philosophy” itself. I don’t intend by this either a

9 See, in reference to the animal, in this way Heidegger intends the being closet in a world, limited by his own environment kept from any sort of transcendence or freedom. M. Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt – Endlichkeit – Einsamkeit*, Vittorio Klostermann Verlag, Frankfurt/M. 1983, § 47: “Right through his entire life, the animal is captured in its environment just like in a tube which does not stretch nor narrow”.

10 M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, Niemeyer, Tübingen 1927, § 7.

definite discipline, or a definite segment of history composed of this discipline, nor a particular or capital episode of that discipline, and even less some of the few episodes just mentioned; upfront and in spite of the starting example of the *epoché*, I tried to avoid any specificity, any character or configuration extrinsic to that would be understood as “philosophy”. The regular use of quotation marks is the expression of this intention.

254 What do we mean then, by “philosophy”, that which seems to maintain or have within the possibility to subtract itself, at least in part, from everything else, everything, totality? I believe it is necessary to be careful of just any definition, of a positive response, of a positive acceptance of “philosophy”. At least here, at least now. Let’s limit ourselves to gathering this indication from Sloterdijk, and try to contextualize it in a more precise manner. Because this indication appears in a book, in a work in which a certain philosophical plan is perhaps abandoned. Once more, we can look again at one of the more theoretically decisive and explicit texts, where Sloterdijk picks up, to modify it, the question of the plane, of a certain and peculiar plane, that “plane” that in one of the most famous Heidegger texts, the *Letter on “humanism”* is mentioned, in French, in an answer to Sartre that Heidegger wanted to write in French, with the same words but also with the same language as his distant interlocutor. “Précisément nous sommes sur un plan où il y a seulement des hommes” wrote Sartre in *L’existentialisme est un humanisme*,<sup>11</sup> and after repeating this phrase, Heidegger responds: “if, however, we want to think about it as in *Sein und Zeit*, we should say: *précisément nous sommes sur un plan où il y a principalement l’Être*. But where does *le plan* come from and what is it? *L’Être et le plan* are the same”.<sup>12</sup> The perspective from which Sloterdijk reads the answer is clear: “What I would like to show is the fact that here we meet a Heidegger who manifestly no longer reflects on the equivalence between time and being that he made famous. The author of this *passage*, rather, is concerned with a group of different problems that without great interpretive efforts can be identified in those of being and space.”<sup>13</sup> Towards an examination of the question of space, interpreted starting with the notion of *plan* that Sloterdijk places next to the others of heideggerian “space”: “house, proximity, country, living, staying, dimension”.<sup>14</sup> This represents a critical gesture of great importance, especially in that it contributes to “founding” all of the successive reflections of Sloterdijk on the special dimension, included in the various volumes of *Sphären*. In this way there would be nothing to object to.

11 Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’existentialisme est un humanisme*, Nagel, Paris 1946, p. 36.

12 M. Heidegger, *Brief über den Humanismus*, Wegmarken, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt/M. 1976, p. 311.

13 P. Sloterdijk, *Nicht gerettet*, Chap. III.

14 Ibidem.



A doubt comes up at the moment in which, “temporality”, seems to become secondary, in *deuxième plan*, as well as that dimension that I would be tempted to hasten an call “philosophy”. Not because time would be more “philosophical” than space, as much as because that *plan*, that is the same as the *Être*, transforming itself in space seems to leave behind being itself, that being that continues to show up in the texts of Heidegger as a dimension of transcendence, the *transcendens* pure and simple. On the *plan* now there is not just the *Être*, but *seulement l’espace*. And *les hommes*? Have they disappeared too? Maybe not.

It is not only a shifting of time to space that matches this interpretation of Heidegger by Sloterdijk. Maybe it is not the most important shift. In a text famous for having triggered more than a little stir, at a certain point while recounting the heideggerian notion of *Lichtung*, we find the following: “the staying of man in *Lichtung* – Heidegger said the being in or man’s being contained in the *Lichtung* of being – is not at all a primal ontological relationship, inaccessible to further interrogation. There is a story there, resolutely ignored by Heidegger, of man entering into *Lichtung*, a social story of how the question of being implicit in man and it is a historical movement in the opening wide of ontological difference”.<sup>15</sup> A few years later, Sloterdijk formulates the question to which how much we have just felt constitutes the response: “Utilizing the metaphor of living in the house of being as a guide for the process of anthropological thought, we ask ourselves how a still pre-human living being, an animal that lives in a pack and from that point of view ontological on the evolutionary scale, has to be placed somewhere between post-ape and *presapiens*, we wonder how this animal can be put on the road that leads to the ‘house of being’.”<sup>16</sup>

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The terms of the question at this point are very clear. With the translation of the heideggerian question about being and time on the *plan* of space, not only is a modification of a (or the) ontological structure fundamental, but it is contextually reformulates the question of man, the position of those *hommes* that Heidegger didn’t want to leave alone on the *plan* of Sartre but which, approaching them to the *Être*, perhaps he also wanted to highlight the external position one more time, eccentric and ex-isting with compared to everything else. Once again: the anthropological key in light of which Sloterdijk rereads some (many, and important) pages of Heidegger is considered in his notable way of provocation and demystification. Mostly, it allows a wide-reaching vision symptomatic of the present and the instances of its provenance, not to mention the lines of tendency which ostensibly support further development. It should be noted as

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<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

well that an alternative that could continue to maintain a level of radicalism, and thanks to the determination of which, in some texts of Sloterdijk, emerge the forms, it is possible to face in a decisive manner. And it is the alternative, not only methodological, between taking on what is a declared anthropological perspective (or anthropogenetical, or anthropologico-philosophical) or take on a “philosophical” perspective. Again, with no further specification. That perspective against which Heidegger stands with continuity and resolve, “the adversary of all known forms of anthropology”, that is capable of “offering us the key words for a new configuration of anthropology and of the thought of being”.<sup>17</sup>

256 I don't think the question can be placed in the area of a choice between equivalent disciplinary options. Resistance to any form of anthropology, which is nothing other than a “part for the whole” of that resistance to translation in scientific terms of “philosophy”, for Heidegger's part is not fought in the name of belonging to a discipline. Rather, maybe it is fought in the name of something that resembles the opposite of belonging to a discipline, to some thematic place pre-constructed from a particular (and important) “objectivity”. Maybe it is fought for a non-specific or anti-specific “specificity” of the “philosophical”. This does not mean in any way lacking a certain rigor, of a certain order for proceeding, with caution or attention. But on the contrary, it means an even more observed behaviour in order so that not all action is englobed in the totality of the being in its being and becoming, in order to guard the outwardness, a thinkability, the possibility that a “step back” that, to be clear, is not made possible *for* but *because of* “philosophy”.

17 Ibidem.

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