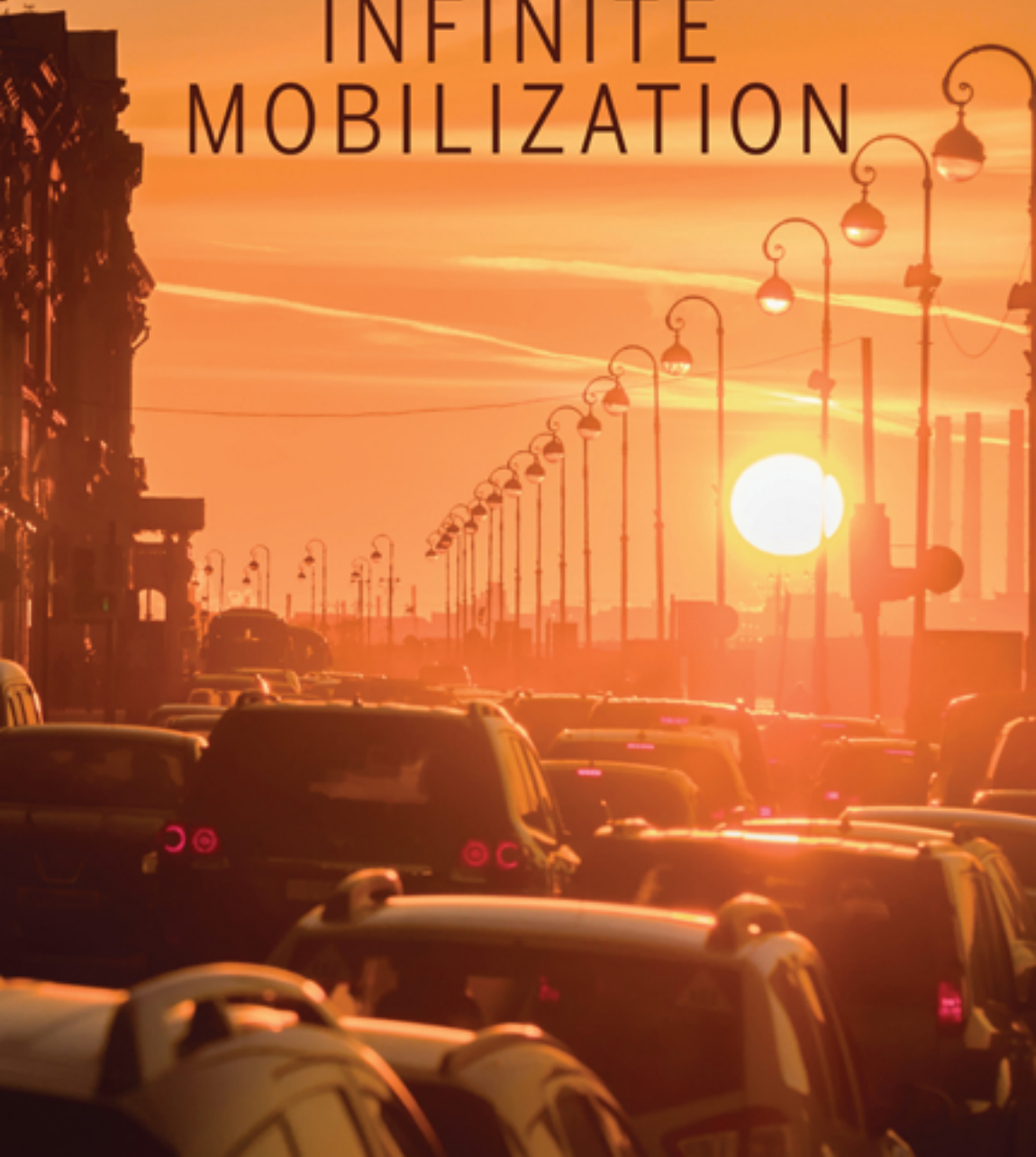


PETER SLOTERDIJK

INFINITE MOBILIZATION



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In memory of Jacob Taubes
1923–1987

Peter Sloterdijk

Infinite Mobilization

Towards a Critique of Political Kinetics

Translated by Sandra Berjan

polity

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Premises

The original German title of this book used the cumbersome and speculative word “Eurotaoism.”¹ Why was this necessary?

There are three possible answers to this question. First, this could be an instance of those involuntary and nonsensical turns of phrase that I have been shown to let slip rather frequently; if this is true, we might as well assume that the book has already died of its own title as though from an overdose of profundity. Second, what we could have here is an example of combinatorial wit in the style of Friedrich Schlegel’s shotgun weddings of two vastly differing terms; but should such wit truly be in play, we had better leave it unexplained – wit that supplies its own discussion is no longer witty. However, since combinatorics is a tried and true early romanticist method for the discovery of structural analogues, a request for patience may be permitted in order to await the result. Third, “Eurotaoism” could be the heading above a missed opportunity. Such a title lends itself so easily to saying something groundbreaking about the play of polarities, the reunification of spirit and nature, and the opening of the heart chakra. All these things are of concern to us. I admit that it is a shame when an opportunity is missed to assure readers that they, too, have the divine within them. But denying the facts leads nowhere; there is nothing uplifting in what follows. This book and its title linger solely in problematic terrains – its appeal is exclusively aimed at the need to understand what drives the current course of the world in the direction it is going. Addressing the needs of intelligence in this way is still valid, even if we have to admit that the proposed exercises in comprehension seem like the gesticulations of a streetlamp lighter who wants to make himself useful in a city that has switched to neon lighting.

These answers will no doubt disappoint. Clearly, this is not so much about precise inquiries as an evasive maneuver in the face of embarrassment. But was an affirmative answer really to be expected? The Tao in the mouths of Western writers ... is it not just a Joker card one plays when it comes to promising more than can be delivered? Oh, Taoism! Magic formula for immediate wholeness and lab-made safety, courtesy of atomic physics! The enigmatic syllable “Tao” has recently fallen into the category of kitsch, and those who henceforth commit themselves to its bright magic will be suspected of having joined the New Age choir singing holistic couplets. But I consider it *a priori* the very center of my work to make myself available for suspicion. After all, philosophers have previously only questioned the interpretation of the world made by other people – it is necessary to engage in it.

“Eurotaoism” – to hint at a more serious answer – is also a title for the attempt to call attention to the peculiarity of the history-making continent in such an urgent way that a merely superficial critique of it can no longer become plausible. Even if we recognize Eastern wisdom as an impressive and singular greatness, Asian imports alone will not save the Western-mobilized world. The initiative of “Americotaoism” is just that – a response to the “crisis of the West” by importing holistic fast food from the Far East. Of course, this fast food sells itself as Nouvelle Cuisine; it relies on innovation as if it were an irresistible recipe, serves up planetary paradigm shifts like courses on a traditional menu, and earnestly promises that the raw fish course will be followed by a tender Aquarian chop-suey. But as one might fear, the scope of New Thinking amounts to nothing more than suggesting that we eat our ideas with chopsticks from now on – “you are what you eat.”

The present response concedes the validity of such Californian suggestions where they have their place. It serves to remind, however, as humbly as possible and as defiantly as necessary, that there are dishes – to stay with the metaphor – that would leave us hungry with chopsticks in our hand. And these are – literally speaking now – the large-scale phenomena which emerged from the Old European epistemic-messianic substance and became effective on a planetary scale: history, science, industry, mass communication, speed. Even if these are not a constant topic of discussion, the essays in this field constantly gravitate around them. They form the criteria for thought capable of thinking the present. In the face of such thorny phenomena, it may seem like mockery to quote the round world of ancient Chinese polarities. If the title of this book nevertheless does so, it is to recall the ironic scope of self-generated problems at the place where the launching pads of the modernizing expeditions

were mounted. From there on out, one would have to be a Taoist to endure the insight that even Taoism can't help us anymore.

Why, then, Eurotaoism? In this strange word we hear the remaining echoes of the history-making discontent that drove the great revolutions of modernity. We also hear it chime astonishment that nothing better came out of the European uprisings into the new than the all too current drift towards catastrophe. As a picaresque term, it has something of that "jaded bitterness" from which the guiding intellectual forces of earlier times wanted to distill the knowledge of revolution. But wearing a jester's hat, the word now heralds an alternative critique of modernity – a critique of planetary mobilization as a false permanent revolution. Coupled with the subtitle – "Towards a Critique of Political Kinetics" – the term gradually becomes reasonable in a rather crazy way. This is also evident by the fact that it will no longer play a role in what is to follow. The word appears only once more – the reader will have to guess to what purpose.

Like all that I have previously published, these texts are subversive exercises against the absolutism of history and socialization. Instead of orienting ourselves by the progressive norm that so quickly degenerates to a forward crawl, I recommend being attentive to sideways mobility. That is what the recourse to the ancient cynical intervention and the allusion to the utopian sharp wit of the man in the barrel were about, only in a more indirect and ambiguous way. In the meantime, the amusement over the critique of cynicism has dissipated; among those capable of judgment, nothing remains of the misunderstanding that critique would thus be reduced to mere pantomime. The thing that always emerges from the discovery of pantomime – the understanding of gesture, gesticulation, and movement – has crossed over into suggestions for a theory of civilizing movement; a theory in which the life-or-death difference between mobility and mobilization presents itself as criterion of an alternative "ethics." Thus, the following pages contain a new version of critical theory in its embryonic form – not of "society" but of the Western type of progressive process that is played out by modern societies. In the current world process, which exhibits an accelerated movement towards catastrophe, people – as the perpetrators and victims of mobilization – experience their predominant life form as something that leads the wrong way. In their characteristics as perpetrators, they at the same time learn of their ability to be so completely in agreement with the trend towards the wrong thing that they identify with it. Thus, a critical theory of mobilization is not just a translation of the critique of alienation into a language

of kinetics. One has to assume that within the most hazardous accelerations of the present, something is executed that stems from what is our own, what is closest to us – in other words, something self-intended. If this is the case, then a critical theory of society is no longer possible, since there is no actual difference between the critique itself and the object of that critique – unless the critique would first turn its thinking against itself and then also examine what is of one's own, nearest and self-intended, as well.

This kind of critique has so far only existed in the form of theology. Theologians have enjoyed the prerogative to critique the world as such in the name of an Other that is superior to the world, so that that which is one's own was also subject to criticism. In this book, I attempt to repeat a critique of this kind in a non-theological way. This presupposes that the critical spirit can break away from the world to distance and transform what is one's own, nearest and self-intended, too. Such a critique explodes the cynical-melancholy notion of a fallen world, one that nowadays sells itself everywhere as post-modern acceptance. It also eschews masochistic total contemplation, which leads to a metaphysical “drop-out-ism.” Neither escapist nor in agreement, the goal of alternative critique is to advance a critical theory of being-in-the-world. It would become plausible in the moment it successfully indicated a non-theological space for distance from the world – opened up a transcendence for the purpose of methodology, if you will. I am of the opinion that we are at the beginning stages of such a theory. Its center forms an analytics of coming-into-the-world² where the position of philosophical anthropology that humans are “here” loses its validity – we may no longer carelessly assume that “existence” and “being-in-the-world” can be attributed to humans. The presumption that “human beings” are already “in the world” and “exist” becomes corrected by a Socratic maieutic method that deals with arriving on earth and generating worlds, as well as the risk of failure associated with both efforts. What was previously considered to be existential philosophy becomes transformed into a cosmology of the individual – each birth is a chance for a world to sprout up. Maieutic philosophy speaks of the exertion that actually emerging individuals must generate in order to *be there*. What is thus brought into discussion follows the movement of the life that comes into the world. In this way, the maieutic method once again speaks a serious language – a dramatic world language about the commonly inevitable.

As we will see, only trace elements of these kinds of reflections have previously been available to us in an explicit way – elements that inhabit the space between Heidegger and Bloch, Cioran and

Lao Tzu (a space that is barely still surveyed or even perceived). Nevertheless it must be said – to avoid creating confusion – that the explicit elements of the following will appear obscure without the implicit. The reflections steer towards the thesis that the idea of critique without reserves against the unreasonable demands of the world will remain hollow. The question of whether a critical theory is still possible depends on resolving the problem of whether an enlightened a-cosmism may not be a necessary mode of lucid life.³

It is no wonder that serious tones predominate in this book. Other tones have joined the amoral cabaret that wanted to save itself from tragedy. The Teutonic vein in particular stands out more noticeably, weighing down the carefree cheer of the otherwise preferred Southern tone. Thin vibrations of Chinese elements add themselves to the mix and a fatal music of the spheres is barely perceptible against the death march of hardness, strength, skill. It would also be wrong to deny that, here and there, a Jewish cantor's world lament can be heard, for whom every man-made wall becomes a Wailing one. The dedication to Jacob Taubes – one of the last great representatives of the Jewish spirit in the German language – who died in March 1987, holds a commitment to the memory of apocalypticism as a Jewish alternative to the optimism of the moderns and the tragicism of neo-heroics. It is in Taubes' work that I experienced an unforgettable enlightenment about that which Manés Sperber calls the religion of good memory.

A nuance will surely elude a reader who is unfamiliar with the landscape where these texts largely came into being. In them, at least to my perception, some of that ahistorical calm of a Provençal summer has been stored. They assume a refutation of city neuroses through heat and light; you may sense the spirit of that place in the way that thoughts at the end of a given paragraph do not always continue on logically – there are frequent imperceptible interruptions between one sentence and the next. The warmth of the land seeps into these gaps – a land that rests upon itself in a burning euphoria. In such a climate, one's very physiological functions change. Thinking automatically becomes a measure against the heat even though it cannot entirely help but become a symptom of it as well – cruelly rested, it glints at the reader mischievously, as if offering an invitation to a long siesta; it seems to be joviality itself at play. Sitting at Northern desks, one might not be able to immediately pick up on these conditions because different requirements apply to them. Nevertheless, to understand the matters at hand, one must go to the countryside from time to time. The task of discovering a slower pace applies to philosophy as well.

The more horses you hitch up, the faster it goes – I mean, not tearing the block out of the foundations, which is impossible, but tearing the reins and so travelling empty and joyful.

Franz Kafka⁴

1

THE MODERN AGE AS MOBILIZATION

May your fate be to live in interesting times.

Ancient Chinese curse

Can humans still comprehend the general development of the modern world that they have set in motion? A growing list of contemporaries denies that it is possible – their answers are based on arguments and not just instinctual reactions. For this reason, there is much talk of a post-modern condition at the end of this interesting century.¹ But the inscrutable aspects of our times are so uniquely new that we must not equate our current confusions of the mind with pre-modern surrenders of human reason when confronted with the mysteries of the world.

One idea has rooted itself in pre-modern ways of thinking more deeply than any other: nothing turns out the way it was planned. For even though man may propose, it is still the gods who dispose, whatever the case may be. The *a priori* of any Old World practical life experience is: if it happens as it should, it happens differently than it was planned. This experience cannot rid itself of the constant awareness that human plans and actions always move in the recesses of an insurmountable passivity. But with the advent of modernity, things happen in a new way – just as humans have planned. They do so because people in the West, monks, merchants, physicians, architects, painters, and cannon-makers – *in summa* geniuses and engineers – have begun to organize their way of thinking in an entirely new way; and (one would like to say, suddenly) a new kind of “praxis” joins this reorganization of thought as the technological

counterpart of thinking and intervenes in the events of the world with a revolutionary impact. Modernity as a techno-political composite has unhinged the old familiar equilibrium between human power and powerlessness. Spurred on by a history-making amalgam of aggression and optimism, modernity promises us a world in which things turn out as planned because people are able to accomplish what they want – and if not, they are able and willing to learn. In modern times, it is the will to power of the can-do spirit that makes the world go around.

It is for one reason only that we call our epoch modern: people of the West have been so captivated and impressed by their own great deeds that they found the courage to proclaim that they had created the world on their own. This and nothing else constitutes the very core of what we (often defensively) refer to as the project of modernity. This project nature of the modern era stems from the grand assumption that we will soon be able to control the world to such an extent that nothing continues to develop unless we wisely choose to maintain it with our own actions. The modern project is thus established on the basis of a *kinetic utopia* – something that has never been explicitly articulated: the total movement of the world is to be the implementation of our plans for it. The movements of our day-to-day lives become progressively identical with the movement of the world itself; the process of the world as a whole increasingly resembles an expression of our lives – things occur as planned because that which occurs is increasingly an event of our making. It would not suffice to say that modernity set out to make history from this point forward. At its innermost core, modernity wants to create nature in addition to history. As this evil century draws to a close, it dawns on us that making history was just a pretext. The crucial issue of the modern era is the nature that is to be made.

As soon as modernity's kinetic utopia is revealed, its seemingly stable foundation cracks open and new problems come to light – what we have learned in the good old modern age no longer applies to anything. The paradoxes displayed by the very developments of the modern era constitute the thus newly formed and unusual problem world: a post-history superimposes itself onto history, an epinature onto nature, and a post-modernity onto modernity. Meanwhile, the inevitable transformation of modernity into post-modernity becomes obvious to any onlooker. It results from the observation that even modern events occur differently than planned – but not because man proposes and god disposes; rather, this notion that “it must occur differently” is both inherent in and not quite understood by our thoughts and actions, and it pushes right through our venture with an unstoppable irony. Things do not happen according to plan

because we have left movement out of the calculation. Things unfailingly do not happen according to plan because as we think through and bring forth what is supposed to occur, we automatically set in motion something else as a by-product – something we did not think about, did not want, and failed to consider. Once set in motion, it propels itself forward with a dangerous tenacity. It seems that we have surrounded ourselves with an epinature of consequences that slip away from the grasp of our “history-making” praxis like a secondary physis. With mounting unease, we watch as the self-perpetuating side-effects of modern progress spill over into the controlled projects; a fatally foreign movement breaks off from this very core of the modern enterprise, from within the consciousness of a spontaneous independence that is guided by reason – and it slips away from us in every direction. What looked like a controlled uprising towards freedom turns out to be a slide into an uncontrollable and catastrophic hetero-mobility. Precisely because so much comes about *through* our actions, just as we have planned, developments as a whole turn out explosively and affect us quite differently.

This is the post-modern *status quo*, and it is actually a *lapsus* – a regressive step. A philosophical post-modernism made up of insights and not merely nostalgic posturing or bad moods can only be possible today because, given the actual course of events, powerful arguments make it clear that the bubble of modernity’s kinetic utopia has burst. Unforeseen processes have gained momentum, and it is doubtful whether humans can ever rein them back in and divert them to a trajectory that will not prove fatal.

If we were to give a philosophical name to the drift of the current “civilizing process” (a dreadful term that burns the tongue), we would have to say that it resembles a thinking avalanche. What is a thinking avalanche? We do not know, but it is certainly what we are. We were hardly predictable as such, but this astounding avalanche is nevertheless plunging towards the valley as we speak. The “civilizing process” (the tongue begins to ache) turns out to be a pressing ontological oddity. What becomes a given in this process is nothing other than a self-reflexive natural catastrophe. And like all that is calamitous, this, too, is philosophically very interesting. The thinking avalanche is the industrial post-Christian counterpart to Pascal’s thinking reed, which once upon a time trembled in the icy breath of the early modern era. Meanwhile, the most fragile of all creatures, the human, avalanche *qui pense*, is no longer endangered by the storm of life alone – he is himself setting off the landslides that can bury him alive.

Leaving these rather lyrical intimations behind, we will now turn to the analytical and feel our way forward through the no-man’s-land