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# **ON THE MEANING OF DEMOCRACY: CRITIQUE AND COUNTER-CRITIQUE**

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Peter Sloterdijk is well-known for his critical interventions – and some of his more recent interventions have themselves provoked stern (counter-)criticism. This was the

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case when he positioned himself against the German government's decision to open the borders for refugees on humanitarian grounds. His position included the claim that there is no moral duty of self-destruction. This statement was interpreted by a number of commentators (and by the author of this response) as saying that opening borders and letting a larger number of refugees into Germany would result in such a self-destruction (Cicero, 2016a). This prompted critical comments from both political scientists and media representatives, and the comments included the accusation that Sloterdijk was, in effect, supporting the position of the right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland*, which had also heavily criticised the government's decision to open the borders. Sloterdijk himself denied these charges, however (Cicero, 2016b).

He also experienced some strong criticism after the publication of a semi-autobiographic work entitled *Das Schelling Project*, in which a group of scientists and artists (all identifiable as friends of Sloterdijk – and indeed also Sloterdijk himself – despite slight alterations in their names) attempt – and fail – to secure funding from the German Research Council for a project on the female orgasm. The book was heavily criticised for its misogynist, sexist, and anti-feminist views, which its author seems to share – to a certain extent at least (Die Welt, 2016; Schmitter, 2016). The point here is to provide some recent context for Sloterdijk's remarks in Cardiff, presented here in *New Perspectives*, and to show that he is no stranger to controversy or critique. Having done so, I now turn to the substance of his remarks.

### **THREE COUNTER-CRITIQUES OF SLOTERDIJK'S FOUR CRITICAL INTERVENTIONS**

In his piece, Sloterdijk develops the idea of *pseudonymous politics*. His main thesis is that “in its current usage, the term ‘democracy’ is charged with pseudonymous energy” (Sloterdijk, 2017). Sloterdijk defines pseudonyms as the use of misleading terminology to obscure the true characteristic(s) of something. He claims that pseudonism is still present in what he terms as ‘new democracies’. This densely written piece, which provides a tour de force of developments pertaining to the democratic characteristics of the Roman Empire and the French Revolution, is certainly not light reading. I admit that I had to re-read it a few times in order to make sure not to overlook crucial points, and cannot be sure that I still didn't miss some! What is clear, however, is that he develops four distinct forms of pseudonyms for democracy (Sloterdijk, 2017):

Oligocracy, which “[...] indicates that the collective which is known as ‘the people’ always represents a composite of the Few (*hoi oligoi*) and the Many (*hoi polloi*).”  
Fiscocracy, understood as the ability and the right of the sovereign to collect taxes.

Mobocracy, understood as government by the masses.

Phobocracy, understood as politics characterised by fear and overreaction.

Each of the four is lifted from an analysis of the history of the Roman Empire and/or references to events during the French Revolution. In doing so he claims that because these four pseudonyms developed in the context of the Roman Empire and the French Revolution they were a necessary part of the development of democracy, and remain necessary parts of democracies today. At the very end of his article he juxtaposes the “new democracies”, which include the four forms of “intense pseudonism”, with “authentic democracies”, which are defined through the four freedoms Roosevelt once developed. As Sloterdijk rightly observes: “The first two of these, the freedoms of expression and confession, can be viewed as positive freedoms while the latter pair, the freedoms from want and fear, can be categorised as negative freedoms” (Sloterdijk, 2017).

Having provided a summary of the article and a contextualisation of the author, I now turn to three points of critique. The first concerns the use of the term ‘democracy’ by Sloterdijk, and in response I suggest an alternative understanding, which I take from Robert Dahl’s well known work on the matter. I then move on to the second point of critique, which can be summarised as the ‘fallacy of misplaced concreteness’, and subsequently onto the third, which claims that Sloterdijk does not seem to take into account ‘the normative power of the factual.’

## **On Democracy and Democracies**

Throughout his text Sloterdijk makes references to democracy and democracies. He does so by employing a variety of adjectives in order to describe democracies, e.g. “young democracies”, “modern democracies”, “emerging democracies”, “true democracy”, and “authentic democracies”. As a political scientist I take no issue with differentiated descriptions of democracies. However, as Adam Przeworski rightly observes: “Perusing innumerable definitions, one discovers that democracy has become an altar on which everyone has his or her favourite ex voto [a votive offering, SG]” (Przeworski, 1999: 24). It seems that Sloterdijk’s use of such a variety of terms corresponds to Przeworski’s characterisation, particularly when he claims that “almost all political systems which count amongst the 195 members of the United Nations Organisations can in some manner be arranged as a spectrum of democracy” (Sloterdijk, 2017). As Sloterdijk does not provide a clear definition of democracy – which cannot be due to a lack of available options – his statement remains unsubstantiated.

Furthermore, Sloterdijk’s critical analysis of certain forms of democracy does not seem to hold up when it comes to ‘authentic’ democracies, which were already mentioned above. One wonders whether Sloterdijk’s whole argument that democ-

racy is “charged with pseudonymous energy” (2017: 4) rests on an understanding of democracy that is apolitical and only functional. Sloterdijk seems to favour a rather functionalistic account of democracy, as evident from his discussion of Luhmann’s understanding of it (Sloterdijk, 2017). This account lacks the normative dimension of democracy, which, according to a well-known characterisation by Robert Dahl, must include not only such functionalist elements, but also give citizens the chance to make an informed decision, which is only possible when there are enlightened democratic subjects who have enough time to make a decision. Furthermore, all adults must be included as members of the political community (Dahl, 2000, 37–38; Dahl, 1989: 83–134; for a discussion of Dahl’s conception see Owen 2003). On both criteria the early democratic attempts of the French Revolution and the Roman Republic fall short.

On a final note, David Owen demonstrates with reference to the interest-aggregating model (Owen, 2003: 107–111) that, as Dahl has demonstrated with reference to Arrow, “[...] any method for making social decisions that insures transitivity in the decisions must be necessarily either dictated by one person or imposed against the preferences of every individual” (Dahl, 1956: 42). This is an obvious failure of the model, yet it does demonstrate that representative democracy may not be the worst way out of this dilemma. Sloterdijk, however, takes issue with such models, basing his claim on the fact that this idea of representative democracy is in fact a representation of oligarchy and hence problematic (Sloterdijk, 2017). So, in proposing a host of problems with – as well as pseudonyms for – *democracies*, Sloterdijk obscures the benefits of (representative) *democracy* as such.

### **The Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness**

The fallacy of misplaced concreteness refers to the idea that one takes a concrete object and transfers its characteristics to the abstract conception of that very object. Sloterdijk develops a critique of the idea of ‘democratic’ representation of the many by the few based on the political actions of the French doctor and scientist Jean Paul Marat, who played an infamous role during the French Revolution and, as Sloterdijk remarks, “[...] claimed up to 100,000 victims” (2017: 5). The claim Sloterdijk makes is that ‘the few’ when representing ‘the many’ in the case of the French Revolution “[...] immediately configured the post-monarchic system to their own advantage” (*ibid.*). I do not object to the historical analysis, but I do not see how this episode of the French Revolution is a substantial argument to demonstrate that there is an “essential problem of the representation of the Many by the Few [...]” (*ibid.*). What in my view Sloterdijk does here is draw conclusions about the general idea of representation from a single, concrete example. While this is of course possible when one works inductively, it becomes problematic when the specific is seen as a representation of the general. Here the latter is the case, and thus Sloterdijk commits

the fallacy of the misplaced concreteness – in effect tarring the many of democracy with the brush of the failings of the few in the French Revolution.

### **Normative Powers: The Factual, Language and Social Construction**

Notwithstanding recent claims over ‘post-factual politics’, the idea that ‘the factual’ possesses a certain normative power is not a radically new idea but rather well established within political theory and political philosophy (and beyond) (Gehlen, 2012; Habermas, 1992). Sloterdijk, however, seems to take a different view when he suggests with reference to the Roman Empire that “[...] the facts and their nomenclature had to be systematically kept apart” (2017: 2). This is problematic on two accounts. First, it defies the aforementioned idea of the normative power of the factual, as facts develop a normative power on their own, regardless of an unfitting or misleading nomenclature. Second, even if the nomenclature was misleading and not pointing to a monarchy, even if the political system was *de facto* one (Sloterdijk, 2017: 3), the fact that it was called a republic affected the reality in a substantial way, in so far as it is safe to assume that that the reality we live in is socially constructed and language is indeed constitutive of our social reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1967 [1966]: 22; Doty, 1993: 302; Müller, 1994: 39; Fierke and Jorgensen, 2001: 4). Nonetheless, such a constructivist perspective requires us to inquire into what gets constructed as the factual and what role language plays in stabilising and destabilising this, but also how it is countervailed by other modes of social construction.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In this response I have tried to come to terms with Peter Sloterdijk’s ideas and develop a critique based on three themes: the use of the terms ‘democracy’ and ‘democracies’, the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, and the normative powers of facts and language. I do not deny that Sloterdijk’s paper contains useful ideas and valid arguments, but in my reading of the piece its weaknesses and omissions outweigh its strengths and the importance of the valid claims he makes. Democracy is not a fixed concept. Rather, as a “fundamental norm” (Wiener, 2009: 183) it is, as critical constructivist research rightly holds, inherently contested, as all norms are (Wiener, 2007: 58). As political scientists and citizens we should not take democracy for granted, as the recent developments in Hungary, Poland, Turkey, and the USA have demonstrated. It is the responsibility of those of us who study norms such as democracy and the rule of law and are concerned with questions of human rights to also engage publically and politically on their behalf (Przeworski, 1999: 50). Otherwise, Sloterdijk’s claim would hold true that “[...] the academic few foist their unsolicited services on the silent Many, and almost never for their

benefit” (Sloterdijk, 2017). The response I present here is an attempt to ensure that this is not the case.

## ENDNOTE

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