

# Are these Bubbles Anarchist? Peter Sloterdijk's Spherology and the Question of Anarchism

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## **ABSTRACT:**

The question of solidarity is an important one for anarchism. However, to date solidarity as a concept has not been given the philosophical attention it deserves. In this paper I wish to fill in this gap in the anarchist literature and discuss solidarity from the perspective of Peter Sloterdijk's work. I will examine the key features of Sloterdijk's theory of spheres and claim that his spherology can be useful for thinking about solidarity in the context of anarchism. Sloterdijk's work also allows for a theoretical support of the anarchist idea of slow, everyday transformation that is often contrasted with its main counter model for social change – revolution. It also offers an alternative to the usual philosophical reference that anarchists turn to in order to describe anarchist collectives, that is, Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze's rhizomes. Although not an anarchist himself, Sloterdijk provides a theoretical framework to understand and constructively think about anarchism and contemporary anarchist movements.

**Keywords:** *solidarity, anarchism, Peter Sloterdijk, spheres, social transformation, mimesis*

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In her contribution to *The Continuum Companion to Anarchism* entitled 'Where to Now? Future Directions for Anarchist Research', Ruth Kinna pointed out a gap in anarchist literature concerning the question of solidarity (Kinna 2012, p316). Little has been written about anarchism with a key focus on solidarity and virtually nothing can be found on a philosophical concept of solidarity in relation to anarchism. In this paper I will attempt to fill in this gap in anarchist literature and discuss solidarity from the perspective of Peter Sloterdijk's work.

His *Spheres* project (1998-2004) and his *You must change your life* (2009) are the key foci of this paper.<sup>1</sup> I will examine selected features of Sloterdijk's theory of spheres that are relevant to anarchism. Here I will work with Uri Gordon's definition of contemporary anarchism in practice that he elaborates in *Anarchy Alive!* (2007). My claim is that Sloterdijk's spherology can be useful for thinking about solidarity in the context of anarchism, and in particular for eco-anarchist movements. Sloterdijk's work also allows for a theoretical support of the anarchist idea of slow, everyday transformation that is often contrasted with the model of social change achieved through the means of a revolution. As his description of society is based on the concept of *mimesis* and *training* – defined as a bodily repetition of available models – Sloterdijk's ideas can be useful for thinking about anarchist collectivities. These collectivities try to introduce alternative, daily practices into their micro social structures as a way to permanently change the surrounding world. I will show that this is where Sloterdijk's mimetic concept of training can be used as a valuable conceptual tool towards understanding anarchist collectives. My claim throughout this paper is that contemporary anarchism in practice is an effective form of harnessing mimesis towards a more habitable world. What is more, Sloterdijk's theory of spheres offers an alternative structure to the usual philosophical model that anarchists use in order to describe anarchist collectives, that is, Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze's rhizomes (see Gordon 2008). Although rhizomes are a powerful image, they emphasise the network links between entities rather than the spaces in which these entities are embedded. I wish to argue that spaces, which anarchists create through their practices and which they inhabit, are crucial for understanding contemporary anarchism in practice. Sloterdijk's structure has a form of bubbles and foams and is based on the concept of immunity that we share not only with other human beings but also with the environment, the plants, the animals, architectural structures, meta-narratives, technology. I wish to demonstrate that although Sloterdijk himself is not an anarchist,<sup>2</sup> he provides a valuable theoretical framework to understand and think about contemporary anarchist movements.

Before we begin, it is relevant to describe briefly Sloterdijk's position both in the Anglophone academic world and in Germany. Peter Sloterdijk, besides Jürgen Habermas, is the most important contemporary German philosopher, yet he remains less well known among the Anglophone academic audience. This is partly because only few of his books have been translated into English. Among the works that I am going to discuss here, only the first two volumes of his trilogy *Spheres* are available in English and the translation of *Du mußt dein Leben ändern* (2009) (*You must change your life*) was published in 2013. In Germany, Sloterdijk does not

receive the scholarly attention he deserves even though he is the most widely read philosopher by the German general public. On the one hand, this might be due to the fact that he blurs the distinctions between philosophy and literature in his style of writing and his style of thinking. This makes it particularly challenging for academic scholars to engage with him on a strictly philosophical level. On the other hand, the scholarly silence around Sloterdijk among his German colleagues might be due to the infamous ‘Sloterdijk-Habermas’ scandal at the end of the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Since then the philosophical sides have been picked, scholarly war zones established and for the time being it seems that Habermas has the upper hand in German academia. Sloterdijk however has a strong following in a philosophically-engaged non-professional readership: he is the most commercially successful contemporary philosopher in Germany since the war and his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, published in 1983 is a European bestseller. In the discussion that follows, I will focus on two aspects of his work relevant to anarchism: the question of solidarity and the everyday, ‘slow’ social transformation in anarchist collectivities.<sup>4</sup>

## COEXISTENCE IN MICROSPHERES: DYADIC SUBJECTS

The tacit assumption of this paper is that in order to think properly about anarchism at the philosophical level, one needs to rethink the concept of collectivity and, together with it, collective social transformation. In order to do that, in turn, one needs to completely rethink conceptual points of departure. Instead of thinking about human beings as individuals who try to make connections with the outer world – a standard assumption in the Western philosophical tradition, one needs to start thinking about humans in terms of pluralities that run the constant risk of becoming separated. Sloterdijk does that because he conceptualises the human being as originally a dyadic structure always nestled in a sphere. That is why, as it will become clear, Peter Sloterdijk’s work can be valuable to anarchist rethinking of collectivity and social change. The sphere is a key notion with which he attempts to describe both human beings and human space in a new way, combining topological, anthropological, immunological, and semiological aspects. This is to emphasise the rarely considered idea of the ‘interior’, which is created between two human beings and the space around them in an intimate ‘being-with’, which Sloterdijk calls a microsphere or a bubble (*S III*, p13). He characterises the microsphere as a sensitive, adaptive and moral (*seelenräumlich*) immune system. For Sloterdijk, humans cannot exist without an immune system, which means they cannot exist beyond ‘the wall-less hothouses of their closeness relationships’ (*S II*, p135). They create various worlds together with other people, animals or

things, which are called spheres. A sphere is 'a place of strong relationships' where one establishes a 'psychical relation of reciprocal lodging' (*S III*, p302) with people and objects nearby. In his grand meta-narrative, *Spheres*, Sloterdijk presents human beings from the point of view of intimacy and relocation and is interested in forms of collectivity and, most importantly, in 'the collective forms of individuality' (Schinkel & Noordegraaf-Eelens 2011, p7). In what follows I briefly outline how Sloterdijk conceptualises a system in which humans originate from plurality and are inextricably connected to the surrounding inorganic world. This is crucial for understanding solidarity from Sloterdijk's perspective and connecting it to eco-anarchist movements.

In order to understand how Sloterdijk thinks about spheres it is useful to consider the first sphere which a human inhabits. In *Spheres I* Sloterdijk considers the smallest possible form of sociality. His point of departure is one anterior to the habitual Freudian conceptualisation of a human being. Sloterdijk focuses on the time before the birth: the nine months after conception, where a human being begins to exist only in and through a relationship with another human being – the mother. His initial assumption is that human being starts as a co-existence, rather than a metaphysical autonomous one. 'Being-a-pair', he claims, 'precedes all encounters [...] it always takes precedence over the two single units of which it seems to be "put together"' (Sloterdijk & Funcke 2005). Human space is from the beginning bipolar, and it is co-subjectivity that is a basis for subjectivity. Therefore, being is always primarily being-with and 'there can be no I without us' (Thrift 2012, p140). It is therefore only through *being in a pair* and in the *act of habitation* that a subject comes into existence and continues existing. From this perspective, individualism and loneliness come chronologically after being-with: 'With this we enter the terrain of a radicalized philosophical psychology that departs from the general faith in the priority of individuality' (Sloterdijk & Funcke 2005) and this philosophical gesture accomplishes a radical critique of subjectivity.

For Sloterdijk, humans are first and foremost 'human locators' in that they are 'subjects only to the extent that they are partners in a divided and assigned subjectivity' constituted by space (*S I*, p85). Existence starts with inhabiting a mother's body and proceeds to inhabit closed interiors, apartments, and houses. This transfer from space to space is accompanied by recreating protective envelopes, which constitute immunity, using technological means. For Sloterdijk humans have no choice but to build spheres. They need protective or immunising systems to survive. In order to exist they need to be 'continually working on their accommodation in imaginary, sonorous, semiotic, ritual and technical shells' (*S I*, p84). They are, in that sense, interior designers. Sloterdijk defines a sphere as

[t]he interior, disclosed, shared realm inhabited by humans – in so far as they succeed in becoming humans. Because living always means building spheres, both on a small and a large scale, humans are the beings that establish globes and look out into horizons. Living in spheres means creating the dimension in which humans can be contained. Spheres are immune-systemically effective space creations for ecstatic beings that are operated upon by the outside (ibid., p28).

The name Sloterdijk gives to humans is *Homo immunologicus*, which describes humans as creatures that ‘exist not only in “material conditions”, but also in symbolic immune systems and ritual shells’, as those who must give their lives a symbolic framework (*MLA*, p10). Humans are embedded within envelopes that give them meaning and recreate a form of physical or psychic protection. These envelopes are formed through strong relations with people or with other entities that give us immunity, ranging from architectural structures, interior spaces, and technology to grand meta-narratives such as religious and political systems. Such envelopes are always spatially situated, and often take form of the physical spaces that surround us. One can say that a microsphere emerges whenever a psychical or physical membrane is established that provides immunity (Borch 2011, p32). Because humans need multiple spheres and multiple immune mechanisms to exist, the world in Sloterdijk’s philosophical system is not a single coherent whole but rather is made up of immiscible worlds. Humans participate and create multiple microspheres simultaneously. As Bruno Latour rightly observes: ‘we move from envelopes to envelopes, from folds to folds, never from one private sphere to the Great Outside’ (Latour 2011, pp158-9). Latour compares the relationship of the human to the inaccessible Great Outside with a cosmonaut in the outer space who cannot survive without his life support system and so ‘naked humans are as rare as naked cosmonauts’ (p158). In order to survive one needs to create immunity and therefore ‘we are never outside without having recreated another more artificial, more fragile, more engineered envelope’ (ibid.). Depending on a type of immunising technique that is needed at a given time, humans are constantly moving between different existing microspheres or creating insulating bubbles of their own.

Because Sloterdijk is concerned with ‘collective immunological forms’ he is deeply interested in dwelling and housing in all possible senses (Schinkel & Noordegraaf-Eelens 2011, p20). That is why ‘an inquiry into our location’ is so important. Humans are ek-static beings,<sup>5</sup> a thought that Sloterdijk explicitly borrows from Heidegger; however they ‘must first be homely, must first be housed,

before [they] can become ecstatic' (Sloterdijk 2001, p199, cited in Morin 2012, p84). 'The home, the dwelling place, is therefore essential to the coming-to-the-world of the human animal' (Morin 2012, p84). Spheres are exactly those worlds that are 'membranes that protect against outside but [that] are not airtight and impervious like environmental enclosures' (ibid.). As Sloterdijk says in an interview:

I claim that people are ecstatic, as Heidegger says, but not because they are contained in nothingness, but rather in the souls of others, or in the field of the soul of others, and vice versa. They themselves are ecstatic because the other always already penetrates them (Sloterdijk, Noordegraaf-Eelens & Schinkel 2011, pp185-6).

The Heidegger inspired being-in-the-world means, for Sloterdijk, 'being-in-spheres' and spheres are the product of human coexistence. Humans can almost in all situations create an 'endosphere' with another human being. For Sloterdijk, this endosphere between people constitutes human interiority. This interiority is conceptualised as external to an individual – a concept radically different to the one in depth psychology where interiority is inside the individual: '[a human] is a natal [*geburtliche*] and mortal creature that has an interior because it changes its interior' (*S II*, p198). Sloterdijk has an expanded vision of such interiority – he discusses the apartment in the times of modernity in terms of human interiority. In Sloterdijk's view, the apartment for the contemporary human is an immune system (*S III*, p535). It is a means of defence (*Verteidigungsmaßnahme*) and an expansion of a body (*Körperausdehnung*). Therefore, it is not possible to feel at home without first becoming almost unconsciously one with all the objects that fill one's apartment (*S III*, p521). These constitute in a way a part of our interiority. A symbiosis with the apartment, becoming one with one's immediate environment, is an insulation technique, a form of protective cocoon: 'where uninvited guests practically never have access' (*S III*, p582, p540). Interiority viewed from this perspective is neither internal nor entirely human. It is made up of links with inanimate objects and the environment in which humans are placed. As Efrain (2012, pp153-4) succinctly puts it while discussing Sloterdijk's sphere:

The fundamental microcosm is [...] that which takes place when at least two bodies interact in a relation of co-existence which is both spatial and psychological, and which includes the objects, machines in our negotiations with physical and cultural environments from which we seek protection or immunization.

From this perspective, space is crucial because it is the medium of contact with others. Working on one's different spheres in life, being the designer of one's own life spaces, and co-creating them with others, is one of the key activities in the creation of microspheres. It is important to remember that humans are not only designers of their own interior but also, together with other humans, of the world. This aspect of collectivity in designing public and private spheres is essential also for anarchism. Both anarchism and theory of spheres are anchored in the necessity of sharing spaces with others – with the outer limit of a single planet – and with the responsibility related to this fact.

## SOLIDARITY WITH THE UNINTELLIGIBLE

The concept of solidarity is an important one for anarchism. Anarchism is based on the idea of support of entities in the position of vulnerability, the unrecognised, those who are unintelligible from the perspective of the current 'distribution of the sensible' (*partage du sensible*) (Rancière 2004). This means that anarchism focuses not only on persons or groups that are exploited, controlled, coerced, and discriminated against but also, and, I would claim most importantly, it focuses on entities not recognised as ones whose suffering counts. Uri Gordon in his book *Anarchy Alive!* hints at this feature of anarchism when he defines contemporary anarchist movements:

The anarchist movement as we see it today in advanced capitalist countries is not a direct genealogical descendant of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thread of libertarian-socialist militancy, which was effectively wiped out by the end of the Second World War (Gordon 2009, p261).

The roots of today's anarchist networks can be found in processes of intersection and in the fusion since the 1960s, of radical social movements whose paths had never been overtly anarchist. These include the radical, direct-action end of ecological, anti-nuclear and anti-war movements, and movements for women's, black, indigenous, LGTB and animal liberation. Accelerating networking and cross-fertilisation among these movements led to a convergence of political cultures and ideas alongside and (to be honest) way ahead of the conventional Left (whether social-democrat, liberal or Marxist). The conditions for a full-blown anarchist revival reached critical mass around the turn of the Millennium (Gordon 2008, p5).

Gordon continues:

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While often drawing directly on the anarchist tradition for inspiration and ideas, the re-emergent anarchist movement is also in many ways different from the left-libertarian politics of hundred, and even sixty, years ago. Networks of collectives and affinity groups replace unions and federations as the organisational norm. The movement's agendas are broader: ecology, feminism and animal liberation are as prominent as anti-militarism and workers' struggles [...] A stronger emphasis is given to prefigurative direct action and cultural experimentation [...] These qualitative changes add up to something of a paradigm shift in anarchism, which is today thoroughly heterodox and grounded in action (pp5-6).

To this focus on action and heterodoxy, Gordon also adds as its constitutive concepts the open-endedness of the movement's goals and its diversity. In order to describe anarchist organisation, he invokes Guattari and Deleuze's concept of the rhizome: a 'decentralised global network of communication, coordination and mutual support among countless autonomous nodes of social struggle, overwhelmingly lacking formal membership or fixed boundaries' (p14). This structure, as we will see, bears a similarity to Sloterdijk's foam because of the non-linearity, multiplicity, diversity and plurality of connection between different anarchist collectivities. Moreover, the lack of hierarchy between anarchist collectivities makes foam an appropriate structure for describing anarchism. Before we turn to anarchist collectivities as foam, let us consider the concept of solidarity from Sloterdijk's perspective and relate it to anarchism.

My claim is that with the Sloterdijkian understanding of solidarity it is possible to suggest an alternative definition of anarchism to the one Uri Gordon proposes in *Anarchy Alive!* As Gordon is not able to propose a single term that would capture the diversity of anarchisms, he instead analyses anarchism using a cluster of concepts and takes political culture and resistance to domination as his two key concepts. He supplements these with additional satellite terms such as prefigurative politics (direct action), diversity, and open-ended goals (p29). By gathering together overlapping interests of different activist movements and their similar modes of operation, he creates a kind of family resemblance among anarchist initiatives. In that way he is able to account for the wide variety of movements within anarchism. I claim that Sloterdijk's conceptualisation of solidarity enables us to come up with a single umbrella term that could describe contemporary anarchist movements. In what follows, I wish to demonstrate that Sloterdijk's *nobject* relation,<sup>6</sup> understood as a relation to unintelligibility can be connected to the contemporary anarchism in practice that Gordon describes. The 'radical,

direct-action end of ecological, anti-nuclear and anti-war movements, and of movements for women's, black, indigenous, LGTB and animal liberation' (p5) are, in my view, all connected by solidarity with entities in a position of vulnerability. My argument is that solidarity with (localised) unintelligibility is the key concept that unites the efforts of these different activist groups, be it environmental issues, the abuse of animals or discrimination towards the transgender or Palestinian struggles. It is solidarity with unintelligibility, also beyond the question of the human that is at the centre of anarchist concerns. Solidarity in anarchist practice is immediately opened up towards anything that is in need of solidarity: animals, the environment or humans. From the perspective of Sloterdijk's framework it is possible to make an ontological (and perhaps even a normative) claim that one's primary solidarity is with the unintelligible. By rethinking the concept of solidarity it is also possible to give stronger support to the eco-anarchist aims and aspirations from the philosophical perspective.

In his description of object relation, Sloterdijk starts with the moment of conception rather than birth. The foetus and its partner (the placenta) are united by a bipolar intimacy, the first solidarity. The primary pair 'floats in an atmospheric biunity, mutual referentiality and intertwined freedom from which neither of the primal partners can be removed without cancelling the total relationship' (*SI*, p43). Nobject relation is a relation, which is first perceptible for an individual if it is denied or terminated. As long as the foetus is living inside the mother, it floats in a non-duality and does not realise it is part of somebody else, that is, that it is in a relation with a mother. Its nature is a closeness relationship, which is erased as a relationship because there is no subject-object relation but rather an un-relationship (pp287-9). This is one of the points of critique that Sloterdijk makes towards psychoanalysis when he claims that it is a mistake to describe the early mother-child relationship in terms of object relationships (p293). To be precise, Sloterdijk does not negate the existence of an object-subject relationship but rather he claims that what makes us into a subject is a part that is undistinguishable from us. It is a no-part, something without which we are incomplete or have problems in existing; that which, to use Judith Butler's term, 'undoes us' if it is taken away. Solidarity, 'a creaky word from the nineteenth century', is often used to describe this connecting force between people, groups and nations even though it does not fully account for this strong reason for being together (p45).

From spherological perspective, solidarity is the primary relation between a human being and the surrounding world. The unintelligible entity is connected with us through solidarity. Sloterdijk proposes air as an example of a nobject relation. Once the child is born, the newborn's first partner is the outside world –

before it comes in contact once again with the mother – it is the air that it breathes, which replaces the lost amniotic fluid as the successive element: 'For the child, extra-maternal being-in-the-world first and last of all means being-in-the-air and participating without struggles [...] in the wealth of this medium' (p298). The idea that a human being arrives at birth into the 'wealth of air' resonates repeatedly in *Spheres*. As a medium, air cannot be described in object terms, and therefore, together with atmosphere, it is in a nobject relation to humans. However once air is denied to a human, it moves into an object relation with the human (p298). Nobject is then 'the unabandonable intimate something, without whose presence and resonance the subject cannot be complete'. This something can be 'things, media or people that fulfil the function of an intimate augments for subjects' (p467). Nobject, like an unintelligible entity, is an entity that cannot be captured by the available *partage* of the available categories in the world. However, without it, a given entity cannot exist.

In this respect, air, and what he calls air conditioning, is of particular interest and importance to Sloterdijk. This is because we are in a nobject relation with this key medium after birth. With growing air pollution, our connection to air is being transformed from a nobject relation into an object–subject relation, with dangerous consequences for ourselves. From spherological perspective, the unity of humankind (*Einheit des Menschengeschlechts*) cannot be diagnosed any longer through a common *physis* (nature) but rather through a common location (*Lage*) that has to be considered ecologically and immunologically – including the medium of air (*S II*, pp947-8). In this way, climate techniques (*Klimatechnik*) and breath techniques (*Atmotechnik*) are key in thinking about contemporary collectivities: 'Society *is* its room temperature, it *is* the quality of its atmosphere; it *is* its depression, it *is* its clearing up; and it *is* its fragmentation into countless local micro-climates' (p966). From spherological perspective questions of humanity and the *Umwelt*, as both the natural environment and the social world around us, become thoroughly political (p967). As one can see, the theory of spheres, where solidarity is based on common space and on the fragility of that space is, as Sloterdijk calls it, a 'postheroic theory' – a theory in which the emphasis is transferred from the eternal, substantial and primary of the heroic theory towards the 'fleeting, unimportant, secondary' of spherology (*S III*, p37). It is a theory that sides with the unintelligible entities and exposes our constitutive solidarity with them. It is a theory far removed from a revolutionary, heroic model.

We can see here that Sloterdijk proposes a non-anthropocentric conceptualisation of solidarity. By proposing an alternative story to the one told by psychoanalysis, Sloterdijk is able to advance a radical idea of solidarity with the

outside. This concept of solidarity is conceptualised not only to include human-to-human relations but also the world surrounding the human. It puts forward the idea of a human, not as a lonely and separate being, but rather as one that is right from the start and inextricably connected to the world around her: to the air she breathes, to the spaces she inhabits, to the technologies that immunise her. It is solidarity with entities that one does not recognise but without which one is not able to exist. Through proposing solidarity as our intimate connection to unintelligibility, Sloterdijk offers an interesting theoretical approach towards the environment. He is able to account convincingly for our reasons for solidarity with the natural world. He provides both a new idiom and a philosophical grounding that are directly in line with green-anarchists' interests. His spherology shifts the philosophical focus from humans to non-humans actors, to air, to nature. From Sloterdijk's perspective, solidarity is the primary relation between a human being and the surrounding world. Whereas it seems awkward to use for instance the concept of domination to account for environmental concerns,<sup>7</sup> such as air or water pollution, with Sloterdijk's idea of nobject it is possible. That is why, in order to account for and philosophically support eco-activism in anarchist movements, Peter Sloterdijk's work is particularly helpful.

If we consider the concept of solidarity from the perspective of classical anarchism, it seems that solidarity with the intelligibility bears much resemblance to Peter Kropotkin's idea of mutual aid. Both ideas focus on practices of solidarity, on developing good habits that, for Kropotkin, 'insure maintenance and further development of the species' or of a specific group (Kropotkin 1939, p24). However, solidarity with the unintelligible that I wish to propose here is a much more radical idea than Kropotkin's mutual aid. Mutual aid that Kropotkin discusses in his work is a phenomenon internal to a species (in case of animals) and internal to a concrete human grouping (a tribe, a guild, a city in medieval times). Kropotkin describes it as an instinctive tendency towards co-operation between animals: bees, ants, termites, crabs or foxes; and between humans in specific organisations. He considers mutual aid amongst so-called savages and barbarians, in the mediaeval city-state and in nineteenth-century society. These cases of mutual aid are based on relations of inclusion and exclusion from a group. That is why solidarity in *Mutual Aid* seems limited. In contrast to Kropotkin's idea, solidarity with the unintelligible is an inter-species and inter-organic phenomenon. It takes a planetary dimension. It is a relation of a human to the entirety of the world that immediately surrounds her. It is her unacknowledged relationship (what Sloterdijk calls un-relationship) to air, water, other humans, animals and plants. In that way solidarity with the unintelligible is a much broader concept than Kropotkin's mutual aid. It encompasses a

whole spectrum of entities beyond our affinity to the members of the same group or the same species.

The concept of solidarity with the unintelligible encompasses all anarchists' concerns: both the unintelligible entities in form of the transgender, Palestinians, homosexuals and the unintelligible in form of the natural world. Instead of domination, it seems that solidarity with such entities could account for all the diverse contemporary social movements that Gordon brings together under the umbrella term: contemporary anarchism in practice. The richness of the world we arrive into: the wealth of air, the multiplicity of connections we are able to make with the animate and inanimate worlds, is what predisposes us towards connections of solidarity with the world around us, cooperation and community. It pushes us towards responsibility, co-habitation and trust. Solidarity with the unintelligible is a point of departure for humans arriving into the world. In that way Sloterdijk provides ontological reasons for solidarity that are valuable for thinking about contemporary anarchism in practice.

## **ANARCHIST COLLECTIVITIES AS TRAINING CAMPS**

Gordon's contemporary anarchism shares with spherology the idea of non-revolutionary forms of social change.<sup>8</sup> The anarchist idea is to enact a society that one wishes to live in rather than to wait for a revolution to happen: 'The strategic outlook already prevalent among anarchists is that the road to revolution involves the proliferation of urban and rural projects of sustainable living, community-building and the development of skills and infrastructures' (Gordon 2008, p107). Gordon rightly observes in his argument against revolution: 'The moment one focuses merely on the seizure of state power, and maintains authoritarian organization, for that purpose while leaving the construction of a free society for "after the revolution", the battle has already been lost' (p37). The type of 'slow' social change that anarchists are advocating is what Gordon calls 'anarchist r/evolution' (p128). It is living social transformation every day through repeating practices that create more habitable spheres not only for oneself but also for others, and particularly for those in the position of vulnerability. As Gordon says 'a central motivation for anarchist action [...] lies in the desire to *inhabit*, to the greatest extent possible, social relations that approximate anarchists' ideals for society as a whole' (Gordon 2009, p271).

Such practices, aimed at changing a given status quo on a day-to-day basis, are undertaken by affinity groups in anarchist collectivities. An affinity group can be either more permanent (in establishing a housing project, a publishing house,

a co-op farm) or less permanent in a short-term coming together for the purpose of one activity: guerrilla planting of trees in an urban space, alternative spectacles, festivals, parody (Day 2005, Newman 2009). Activity in such collectivities is important because it creates spaces that function according to rules that are different from mainstream society. They are slowly taking over space through establishing alternatively functioning structures and inspiring others to adopt similar practices. Sloterdijk's theory of spheres allows us to describe this type of 'slow' social change and the practices of affinity groups in anarchist collectivities. By thinking in terms of Sloterdijk's foams one is able to understand and philosophically support anarchist collectives. Let us then first see how Sloterdijk describes foams and the interactions between microspheres and then connect this to anarchism as described by Gordon. Sloterdijk defines foam as a collection of bubbles in the microspherological sense:

With the concept of foam we describe an agglomeration of bubbles in the microspherological sense [...] The term stands for systems or aggregates of spherological neighbourhoods in which each 'cell' builds a self-completing context (colloquially: a world, a place), an intimate space of meaning or a 'household' that is maintained by dyadic and pluripolar resonances and that is animated by its very own dynamic (*S III*, p55).

Foam is a system without a centre or hierarchy (*ibid.*, p50). It's a relationship-hothouse (*Beziehungen-Treibhaus*), in which every dyadic subjectivity builds a sphere of intimacy, and each bubble is preoccupied with its own immunity, with its own micro-insulation (p498). The composites of foam are bubbles of different sizes and ages that are glued to one another. Foam works according to the principle of co-isolation (*Ko-Isolation*) where one and the same wall functions as a border for other microspheres. In this way, bubbles in foam influence one another (p55). If one bubble bursts, the others are affected by it and the fragility and co-fragility of bubbles is important for immunitary configurations of human existence. Therefore, sharing walls both provides stability and exposes bubbles to danger. What Sloterdijk's theory of spheres accomplishes is a conceptualisation of social life as precarious, as one 'consisting of the precarious building and break-down of spatial collectivities' (Schinkel & Noordegraaf-Eelens 2011, p13). We are constantly building and destroying microspheres in our daily life or they are built and destroyed for us.

From a spherological perspective 'society'<sup>9</sup> is

[a]n aggregate of microspheres (couples, households, companies, federations) of different formats that like individual bubbles border with each other in a

mountain of foam and order themselves under and above each other without ever really being either within reach or effectively separable from one another (*S III*, p59).

In foam the basic elements are not individuals but pairs, households and resonance communities (*Resonanzgemeinschaften*) (*ibid.*, p302). As Borch remarks, defining couples, households, companies, and federations as single bubbles that make up foam runs the risk of reducing their complexity (2011, p32). However, this seems to be merely a question of scale and foams should be viewed as structures with a fractal dimension: from a distant perspective couples, households, companies and federations may be viewed as single bubbles embedded in a 'society' foam, yet from a close perspective they are complex foams in their own right composed of multiple bubbles. Each microsphere has a monadic fractal structure where a part is a minimal version of the whole. As mentioned above, microspheres emerge each time a membrane is formed that produces immunity. This happens each time one interacts with people and objects, when 'one goes from one thing to the next and builds a context, a coherence or a connection (*Zusammenhang*)' (Morin 2012, p87). Consequently, rather than dispersing, foams operate by concentrating and agglomerating – they form collectivities. According to Sloterdijk, the proper dwelling of a human being is a sphere or multiple spheres where solidarity, trust, and cooperation can develop. Each person spontaneously produces meaningful surroundings that establish connections (*S III*, p662), that is, instances that multiply spheres and so create foams. Even such non-spatial relations like sympathy or understanding translate themselves into spatial terms in order to be imaginable and liveable (pp13-14). From this metaphorical conceptualisation (*Denkbild*) of foam one can propose interpretations of social connections:

Also in the human field, the single cells are glued to one another by reciprocal isolations, separations and immunisations. The multiple co-isolation of bubble-households [*Vielfach-Ko-Isolation der Blasen-Haushalte*] in their plural neighbourhoods can be described as simultaneously closed off and cosmopolitan. This is where the specificity of this type of objects lies. That is why when seen from one's own perspective, foam builds a paradoxical interior where most of the surrounding co-bubbles are at the same time close by and inaccessible, connected and distracted. In spherology, foams build 'societies' in this limited sense of the word (pp56-7).

Although bubbles are inaccessible to one another, they share walls that allow an exchange with the surrounding. Sloterdijk calls them 'porous foams' (*poröse*

*Schäume*). The relations between microspheres are based on imitation and contagion: 'the similarity between neighbours is based on mimetic contagion [*mimetische Ansteckung*]' (ibid., pp259-60). In an interview with Bettina Funcke, Sloterdijk claims: 'in social foam there is no "communication" [...] but instead only inter-autistic and mimetic relations' (Sloterdijk & Funcke 2005).

In *You Must Change your Life* Sloterdijk develops a thesis that humans are 'beings [that] result from repetition' (*MLA*, p4). As a mimetic being this *Homo repetitivus* 'struggles with itself in concern for its form' by means of infinite repetition (ibid., p10). Bubbles and foams are important as co-isolated spaces because they allow habits, which are cases of sedimented mimesis, to develop in a controlled environment. They influence mimesis because they provide good or bad models that will be wittingly or unwittingly imitated. This human being creates not only her psychosocial immune system through training and habit but also herself as a subject:

Just as practice makes perfect, training makes the subject [...] As soon as one realizes how every gesture carried out shapes its performer and determines their future state from the second occurrence on, one also knows why there is no such thing as a meaningless movement (p322).

And also:

Humans live in habits, not territories. Radical changes of location first of all attack the human rooting in habits, and only then the places in which those habits are rooted. Since the few have been explicitly practising, it has become evident that all people practice implicitly, and beyond this that humans are beings that cannot not practice – if practising means repeating a pattern of action in such a way that its execution improves the being's disposition towards the next repetition (p407).

For Sloterdijk, ethics emerges automatically with mimesis because we are 'damned to distinguish between repetitions', between models to be imitated (p404). That is why Sloterdijk considers mimetic human being to be equivalent to ethical human being. He says: 'we will characterize [*Homo immunologicus*] more closely as the ethical human being or rather *Homo repetitivus*, *Homo artista*, the human in training' (p10). For Sloterdijk, ethics is a 'primary orientation'. He says:

This brings into view an ethics that does not have values, norms and imperatives at its centre, but rather elementary orientations in the 'field' of existence. In the orientation-ethical approach to the how, the whither and the wherefore of existence, it is assumed that the 'subjects' – the existing parties as those able and unable to live their lives – are 'always already' immersed in a field or milieu that provides them with basic neighbourhoods, moods, and tensions in certain directions (p161).

These orientations constitute tendencies: moods, and inclinations rather than points, acts, and givens. For Sloterdijk, 'we have to practise learning to live – and [...] one can neither *not* practise nor *not* learn to live' (p59). From this perspective, Sloterdijk reads the classical theory of *habitus* or *hexis*, such as that of Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas, as a theory of training where virtue is described as second nature acquired through practice (p184), in the sense that a good person is an 'artist of *virtus*'. She is constantly training her artistry of good. As Sloterdijk puts it: 'The authentic form of the *habitus* theory describes humans in all discretion as acrobats of *virtus* – one could also say as carriers of moral competency that turns into social and artistic power' (p185).<sup>10</sup> The older theories of *habitus* that Sloterdijk considers as correct conceptualisations of repetition constitute 'part of a doctrine of incorporation and in-formation of virtues' (p184). There, 'the original ethical life' is tantamount to oriented mimesis that 'always seeks to exchange harmful for favourable repetition. It wants to replace corrupt life forms with upright ones' (p405). From this perspective it is possible, therefore, to claim that a concern for good habits is a form of practising social transformation. Social transformation is directly related to the daily practice of good habits. The 'good' is defined as a practice that makes the world a more habitable rather than a less habitable place.

In contemporary anarchism, affinity groups operate with the same basic assumption – they direct their practices towards creating a more habitable world, in particular bearing in mind the entities that are in the position of unintelligibility and vulnerability. By doing this they also attempt to mimetically infect (or, in other words, inspire) others to follow suit. Viewed from this perspective, anarchist collectivities can be considered as foams. Both of them are spaces that are constructed through mimetic practice. As foams aggregate, 'neighbouring' microspheres acquire similar habits through 'imitative infections' (*immitativen Infektionen*) (*S III*, pp259-60). This is how contagion in human foam (*Humanschaum*) is possible, and how it can spread to other collectivities. It is this mimetic practice that makes spheres as a result more habitable or less habitable. As Eduardo Mendieta rightly put it:

Anthropotechnology, qua study of the different practices that lead to the creation of different habitats with corresponding habits, the setting up of different residencies in which to lodge and accommodate so that we can inhabit under and with others, means that 'humanity' has once again become a thoroughly political category (Mendieta 2012, p76).

Thus, mimesis, as an ethical and political mechanism, comes down to a concern for good models and good habits that, in consequence, produce liveable habitats for all. Spherology, similarly to anarchism, proposes an idea of transformation that is based on daily effort and constant training that will make a limited space – stretching from an apartment to a shared planet – more (rather than less) fit to live in. This form of transformation is based on cooperation, solidarity and community and is an alternative to an abrupt and heroic idea of social change such as a revolution. The effects of habits both on humans and the natural environment are a matter of equally serious concern and this makes the idea of day-to-day, mimetic transformation non-anthropocentric and so particularly valuable to eco-anarchists.

From anarchist perspective, building a community or a collectivity that works differently from the oppressive structures around it is already an act of localised social transformation. It means creating an alternative structure, an alternative microclimatic space that is good to live in for the dominated person in question by providing her with co-immunity. Such an alternative is also created in the hope of affecting and inspiring people who encounter it. Or, if we use the language of Sloterdijk, we can say that alternative spaces in contemporary anarchism (housing projects, squats, co-operative farms, autonomous zones) are bubbles and foam that provide co-immunity structures. These give support to the oppressed and also create models that will, it is hoped, infect adjacent spaces and so will spread the contagion of change. That is also why Sloterdijk's theory of space (*Raumtheorie*) is so interesting for thinking anarchism on an abstract level. It is able to account for the efforts that are directed at space: taking over spaces and transforming them into liveable atmospheres. It also allows the promotion of a different concept of agency that is based on mimesis and training.

The introduction of radical heterogenic spaces such as anarchist collectivities has disruptive qualities in that it shows there is an alternative to the status quo and has an infectious effect on adjacent spaces, on adjacent bubbles in the foam that is 'society'. Such anarchist collectivities present much needed mimetic models that would present itself for imitation and that also compete with other ('more standard') mimetic models available in culture. They are also important because they are starting points of transformative contagion for the future: 'the collectives,

communes and networks of today are themselves the groundwork for the realities that will replace the present society. Collectively-run grassroots projects are, on this account, the seeds of a future society “within the shell of the old” (Gordon 2008, p37). Contemporary anarchism as a form of ‘slow’ social transformation is a continuous activity located in the present rather than a dream of the future, it is a matter of the arts of existence rather than rare events that revolutionise the world; it is a question of living rather than of demanding.<sup>11</sup> In its practices, anarchism actualises the assumption that humans are mimetic beings who build and share spheres with other entities in the world. Because one is already an active, mimetic being that establishes habits through repetition, social transformation is a question of directing one’s mimesis. It means directing it towards habits that improve the spheres we inhabit not only for ourselves but also for other humans, animals, plants, the surrounding environment. It means directing mimesis towards solidarity with the unintelligible because the unintelligible is what is constitutive of our existence. Anarchism realises this intuition about human beings and their relation to the surrounding world. That is why contemporary anarchism in practice can be defined as an effective form of harnessing mimesis towards a more habitable world.

A new idiom for thinking about anarchism and anarchist solidarities is important because it allows us to account for the complexity of anarchist collectives. The main purpose of introducing spherology in this context is not to enter the squabble about who counts as anarchist and who does not but rather to propose a different metaphorical conceptualisation (*Denkbild*) for thinking about anarchist practice, a different way to think about humans and their sociality. Contemporary anarchism in practice is a multifaceted phenomenon that the received theoretical patterns for analysing social movements do not fully capture. Terms such as equality, domination or revolution miss the importance of: (i) habits in anarchist set-ups and (ii) solidarity with both the excluded particularities and the unintelligible. In order to capture this specificity of contemporary anarchism in practice and its focus on co-operative habits, adopting a new language and a new philosophical lens is crucial. That is why a spherological perspective can be of interest to anarchist studies.

## CONCLUSION

Sloterdijk offers a different way to think about anarchism and anarchist collectivities. With his theory of spheres it is possible to envision radical transformation as happening continuously throughout society. Humans through orienting their mimesis produce spheres that become more habitable or less habitable, depending

on their habits. In this paper I argued that such social transformation, if oriented towards producing more habitable spheres, finds its fullest realisation in contemporary anarchism in practice. Uri Gordon's *Anarchy Alive!* describes anarchism in a way that makes it possible to consider spherology as a potential philosophical framework for understanding contemporary anarchism in practice. Contemporary anarchism is tantamount to collectively creating habitable spheres on a daily basis in the hope that other people or groups will be mimetically infected by the change that is implemented in anarchist collectivities. It permits thinking about social transformation beyond an exclusive concern for the human. It is a way to think about the collective production of habitable spheres not only for humans but also for the natural world.

In this paper I also attempted to demonstrate that contemporary anarchism in practice can be described through the concept of solidarity with the intelligible. With Sloterdijk I proposed to define solidarity as a form of a strong relationship to the unintelligible. Sloterdijk's idea of co-immunity as ontological solidarity and his challenge to our usual thinking about space are two contributions that have the potential to be extremely valuable for anarchism. They re-position human beings towards each other and towards the outer world. As the effective co-immunity structures today are thought on too small a scale: they are formatted 'as in ancient times [...] tribally, nationally and imperially' (*MLA*, p450), an expansion of the concept of immunity seems necessary. We need to reconsider our usual allegiances. We need to start understanding that 'individual immunity is only possible as co-immunity' (p450) not only with other humans but with the world around us. It means making a decision 'to take on the good habits of shared survival in daily exercises' (pp451-2). This decision regards the direction of mimesis, performed by our bodies, as part of a continuous social transformation. 'Slow' social transformation is then a matter of habit and, through the repetition of practice, it amounts to creating spaces, a 'microclimate of practising life' (p229) that have the potential to spread in favourable socio-political conditions. This is possible because spaces and ambiances produced by mimetic humans are never separated from other spaces and other people. The shared space that surrounds us, filled with the air we all breathe and the ambiances we produce, is what we have in common. Once we start thinking in those terms it is impossible to go back to theories based on an individual as a point of departure. This is a way to think about 'the common' beyond communism.<sup>12</sup> And this is, in fact, what contemporary anarchist movements actualise in practice.

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## NOTES

1. I use the published English translations wherever available, that is, *Spheres I*, *Spheres II* and *You must change your life*. For *Spheres III*, the translations from German are my own. I use the following abbreviations: *S I* – *Spheres I*, *S II* – *Spheres II*, *S III* – *Spheres III*, *MLA* – *You must change your life*.
2. In fact Sloterdijk has a very restricted understanding of anarchism in that he equates it with violence and revolution; see, for instance, *MLA* pp49-50, p154, pp385-97.
3. The 'Sloterdijk-Habermas affair' broke out around Sloterdijk's lecture *Rules for the Human Zoo: A Response to the 'Letter on Humanism'* (1999). There, Sloterdijk claimed that for humanism the book was a medium of human-breeding, a form of anthropotechnics. The basic assumption of humanism was the cultivation of humans through reading. Contemporary era, according to Sloterdijk, is the time after the book and new forms of human breeding can be observed, such as genetic engineering. The lecture, which was primarily targeted at Heidegger scholars and contained references to Plato's *polis* as a site of breeding and Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, triggered a series of negative associations among the German public. Sloterdijk was accused in the press of anti-Semitism, of favouring human breeding and of fascism. He responded by pointing out the highly selective reading of his lecture. At the same time Habermas was exposed to have been influencing Sloterdijk's critics behind the scenes. Habermas refused however to engage in a public debate with Sloterdijk. (For more detail see Schinkel and Noordegraaf-Eelens 2011, pp16-18).
4. I develop these ideas in greater detail in my forthcoming book *Theorizing Contemporary Anarchism. Solidarity, Mimesis and Radical Social Change* (2017).
5. 'Ek-static' meaning here 'outside of itself' and constituted by this outside (people, things, phenomena etc. that we encounter in our lives).
6. Nobject is a term that Sloterdijk borrows from Thomas Macho's work (*S I* p467).
7. The importance of the concept of domination for anarchism is argued for most convincingly by Todd May (2009) and Uri Gordon (2008).

8. For other anarchist thinkers who also explicitly engage in elaborating a non-revolutionary form of anarchism see, in particular, Graeber 2004, 2007; Day 2005 and Davis 2012 for a good overview and discussion of non-revolutionary anarchism.
9. The word 'society' is always put in inverted commas in *Spheres* as Sloterdijk tries to propose an alternative term for it i.e. foam.
10. Sloterdijk considers Bourdieu's theory of habitus limited in its scope on many different levels. For a critical discussion see *MLA* pp175-89.
11. Saul Newman calls it '*enacted* utopia that emerges in the present, from present conditions, and that, at the same time, affirms a radical break *with* the present and the invention of something completely new' (Newman 2009, p211). Gordon, like Newman, also attaches his idea of anarchism to a certain reformulation of utopianism, (see Gordon 2009; see also on the connection between anarchism and utopianism: Kinna and Davis 2009).
12. On the 'common' as the basis for the contemporary, theoretical revivals of communism, see Douzinas and Žižek 2010.