

THEORY TUESDAYS @ CORNER COLLEGE

Sessions on April 5th & 12th 2011:

Peter Sloterdijk
Derrida, An Egyptian
On the problem of the Jewish Pyramid

Dear Guests and Participants

Contrary to the cultivated habits you will merely find a compilation of remarkable reviews touching this text by Peter Sloterdijk. For detailed information about the specific text please pay carefully attention to the TT-Newsletter in its current and following issue. In case of not receiving the TT-Newsletter periodically, please send an email to theorytuesdays@gmail.com and order the newsletters of March 28th and/or April 04th.

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Arthur Willemse

“Review of ‘Derrida, An Egyptian’”

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Reviews

Derrida, An Egyptian: On the Problem of the Jewish Pyramid

by Peter Sloterdijk

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by Arthur Willemse

In the essay *Derrida, An Egyptian: On the Problem of the Jewish Pyramid*, Peter Sloterdijk tries to make sense of Jacques Derrida's forebodings on the *survival* of his name and work after his death. Although Derrida is one of the most highly regarded philosophers of the twentieth century and was already a celebrity in his time, he believed that his name would be forgotten the moment after his passing. Yet he also thought that some part of his work would survive in the cultural memory. Sloterdijk takes these two premonitions to be utterly contradictory.

Peter Sloterdijk is a prominent German philosopher and public intellectual. Particularly notable among his works, next to the earlier *Critique of Cynical Reason*, is the vast *Sphären* trilogy (unfortunately unavailable in English at present). In *Sphären*, he transforms the philosophico-anthropological question 'Who is man?' into 'Where is man?' His interest in the environment or whereabouts of humankind can also be discerned here, as *Derrida, An Egyptian* presents a question of logistics, transport science or "political semio-kinetics", as Sloterdijk calls it.

As with Martin Hägglund's (2008) *Radical Atheism – Jacques Derrida and the Time of Life*, Sloterdijk's essay offers another contemporary and important understanding of Derrida's work in light of the theme of survival. To compare, Sloterdijk says the following of survival: "Existing in the moment means having survived oneself up to that point. At every moment in which it reflects upon itself, life stands at its own sepulchre, remembering itself – while the voices of its own been-ness sound from the depths" (2009: 63). Meanwhile, Hägglund writes: "To survive is never to be absolutely present; it is to remain after a past that is no longer and to keep the memory of this past for a future that is not yet" (2008: 1). Both call to mind the position of the philosopher, as described in Derrida's essay 'Violence and Metaphysics', which states that "those who look into the possibility of philosophy, philosophy's life and death, are already engaged in, already overtaken by the dialogue of the question about itself and with itself; they always act in

remembrance of philosophy, as part of the correspondence of the question with itself" (2001a: 99).

The two works differ strongly, however, in their respective approaches. Whereas Hägglund coaxes the notion of survival from Derrida's work in pointed opposition to prominent other readings, Sloterdijk sets up a string of friendly meetings between Derrida and various thinkers and writers. In a paper from 1999 entitled 'Regeln für den Menschenpark', Sloterdijk wrote of the connections and conversations that occur between thinkers separated by time and space. In the present essay, Sloterdijk charts seven such encounters (between Derrida and Niklas Luhmann, Freud, Thomas Mann, Franz Borkenau, Régis Débray, Hegel and Boris Groys) in order to elaborate on the notion of survival in deconstructive philosophy. This is achieved through a discussion of the Egyptian roots of and influence on Jewish culture in particular and Western culture in general. Sloterdijk conceives of Western culture and philosophy as a continuous, circular exodus from a shared Egyptian heritage: the time when no metaphysical language could be spoken as civilisation was the realm of immortals, already present in their self-evident architectural sense – the pyramid. Analogous to Hegel in the *Philosophy of Right*, Sloterdijk often thinks of examples of architecture as being representative of time apprehended in bricks. In his recent book, *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals* (2005), Sloterdijk took Dostoevsky's description of the crystal palace from *Notes from the Underground* to be that of the self-awareness of the globalized society. In *Derrida, An Egyptian*, the pyramid at face value fulfils this role with regards to the Egyptian empire. More importantly, however, it shapes by negation our own contemporary metaphysical attitudes, especially towards death.

Sloterdijk sees Derrida's work as truly connecting with this Egyptian legacy, and admires the work all the more for it. To be sure, there are many instances where Derrida identifies fundamental issues which are justly indecipherable to our philosophical tradition, a tradition Derrida takes to owe its triumphs exactly to this ineptitude with regards to its own foundation. Examples are Bataille's laughter in the face of Hegel (2001b), Levinas' Jewish ventriloquism of the Greek metaphysical language (2001a) and the ghosts of Marxism (2006), never to be incorporated completely in a philosophical account. For Sloterdijk, the pyramid provides another important expression of the ways in which human experience is irreducible to philosophy, and how philosophy thereby *survives* itself.

However much Sloterdijk and Hägglund may be in agreement on some fundamental points, the former finds in Derrida's work an ambiguous

attitude towards mortality. Where Häggglund stresses a clear-cut radical atheism that “informs [Derrida’s] writing from beginning to end” (2008: 1), and which allows for “only one realm – the infinite finitude of *différance*” (2008: 4), Sloterdijk argues that “Derrida did not simply want to drive away the ghosts of the immortalist past; he was rather concerned with revealing the profound ambivalence resulting from the realization that both choices are equally possible and equally powerful” (2009: 37). This is why, in the end, the pyramid entitles the two opposing civilisations – the Egyptian culture of immortality and the modern Greek *polis* – to the same conclusion: “[T]his pit [the pyramid] expresses the fact that human life as such is always survival from the start” (Sloterdijk, 2009: 63).

While his essay maintains its agenda and tries to solve the question of Derrida’s afterlife, Sloterdijk’s series of contextualizations suggests a number of divergent perspectives on his work. For instance, in the confrontation with Hegel, which is particularly telling with regards to Derrida’s style, Derrida is presented as the former’s psychoanalyst. Meanwhile, Derrida will appear in the chapter on Groys as Hegel himself. In doing this, Sloterdijk paints a multilayered and beautiful picture of philosophy as, what could be called following Luhmann, ‘what *we* can do *now*’. It should be noted, however, that not all confrontations are equally rewarding. Sloterdijk’s discussion on Thomas Mann’s novel *Joseph and his Brothers* seems redundant, since it does not at all make “self-evident why Derrida’s deconstruction must be understood as a third wave of dream interpretation from the Josephian perspective”, which would be its sole purpose (2009: 26). Sloterdijk has somewhat of a reputation for allowing himself grand conclusions based less on substantive evidence and more on creative allusions and connections. This reputation is without doubt reaffirmed in this latest essay. He does not provide a close-reading of Derrida. Rather, this slim volume is better seen as providing a profound and provocative example of how thinkers like Sloterdijk and Derrida reinvent the enterprise of philosophy.

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***Derrida, an Egyptian: On the Problem of the Jewish Pyramid.* Written by Peter Sloterdijk. Translated by Wieland Hoban. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009. 80 pages. ISBN: 978-0745646398 . \$12.95 US, \$15.95 CDN.**

Derrida, an Egyptian offers a succinct but considerably instructive and elucidating account of Jacques Derrida's oeuvre. It ventures into the world of deconstruction by establishing consistent connections between Derrida and seven other thinkers. It focuses particularly on the significant role which Egypt and the Egyptian pyramid as conceptual categories of analysis have played in the Western philosophical tradition. 'Egyptian' is what Peter Sloterdijk calls all concepts susceptible to deconstruction, while the 'pyramid' is that which cannot be deconstructed.

The book's seven vignettes can be divided thematically into three parts. Sloterdijk first explores the concept of 'Egyptian' by contextualizing Derrida in the works of Niklas Luhmann, Sigmund Freud, and Thomas Mann. He then examines the concept of the 'pyramid' by reading Derrida through the reflections of Franz Borkenau, Régis Debray and Hegel. Finally, he draws on Boris Groys to suggest a post-deconstructive model of analysis.

With Luhmann, Sloterdijk introduces deconstruction as philosophy's last chance for survival. Deconstruction's ability to penetrate, subvert, and reverse the boundaries of philosophy is what holds it together. As such, deconstruction is "a theory that was always already lying in its own grave, rising from it only for repeated burials" (8-9). This idea of survival through repeated deaths opens up a sound elaboration on the question of 'haunt.' Sloterdijk coins the word 'Egypticism' to refer to what Freud and Derrida have observed as obsessive traces of a certain Egyptian-Jewish ambivalence. Egypticism is that unresolved hyphen; an (ancient) Egyptian identity that continues to 'haunt' the (modern) Jews by Jewish means — including circumcision, the name of Moses, and other aspects.

Both Freud and Mann inspired Sloterdijk to think of deconstruction as a third wave of dream interpretation, as another revision of the Jewish relationship with antiquity, or Egypt. The first wave is Freud's psychoanalytic model of dream interpretation. The second, not so much concerned with the interpretation of dreams, is Walter Benjamin's and Ernst Bloch's attempts to translate signs and traces "with which, according to the messianic reading, humanity had anticipated communism since antiquity" (26).

Mann's account of the story of Prophet Joseph as a great dream interpreter also assisted Sloterdijk in interpreting Derrida's deconstruction as a reassessment of the relationship of the Jews with Egypt and its signs. Deconstruction is thus perceived as Derrida's attempt at revealing the different ways in which Egypt is constantly inhabiting and haunting us. One thing, however, remains immune to all attempts of deconstruction; it is the pyramid, that unshakable Egyptian edifice which looks in its final construction as if it had already crumbled. It always endures in its own collapse.

Sloterdijk's discussion of the pyramid crystallizes in his reference to Derrida's reading of Hegel's semiology in the sixth chapter. He departs from Hegel's assumption that every sign "is the pyramid into which a foreign soul has been conveyed... and is preserved" (56). What interests Sloterdijk most is Derrida's emphasis not only on the mortality of the (Pharaoh's) soul inside the pyramid, but also on the transportability of the pyramid itself. Therefore, the only way to deconstruct a pyramid is by transforming it and bringing it back to its initial form: a pit. The Jewish identity, like all constructs that appear to be immovable pyramids, can be deconstructed by carrying it back along the extended discursive way it has taken.

Towards its end, the text introduces Boris Groys' theory of museology as a post-Derridean reading of the pyramid. With museology, focus is no longer on the pyramid's transportability, but on the burial chamber, the most distinguished and perhaps signifying room in the pyramid. Sloterdijk reads this as a shift from the specters of grammatology to the real mummies. The museological turn should, however, not be

understood as an abrupt alteration. It remains strongly connected to Derrida's interest in archival theory, but sheds more light on the 'real' objects brought to the museum.

The book should be riveting both for specialized and non-specialized readers of Derrida. It is illuminating through its brilliant, accessible definitions of deconstruction, and through the novel links it finds between Derrida and the works of the other thinkers. Sloterdijk is a German thinker best known for his 1983 best-selling book, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* (*Critique of Cynical Reason*, 1988). He is a prolific author who writes about a vast range of topics. Most of his works have not yet been translated into English, including his *magnum opus* trilogy *Sphären* (Spheres), written between 1998 and 2005. Sloterdijk is currently Professor of Philosophy and Aesthetics at the Karlsruhe School of Design, Germany.

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**Peter Sloterdijk, *Derrida, An Egyptian: On the Problem of the Jewish Pyramid*,
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**Reviewed by Stephanie Locke
(Monash University)**

“Derrida, an Egyptian” is a succinct yet extraordinarily intricate thought-tapestry created to commemorate the life and work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in the wake of his passing in 2004. Sloterdijk weaves his argument for labeling Derrida an “Egyptian” through an exploration of how he was or would have been received by other philosophers; specifically Niklas Luhmann, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Mann, Franz Borkenau, Régis Debray, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Boris Groys. Above all, Sloterdijk is driven by the question “[c]ould it be that the core impulse of deconstruction was to pursue a project of construction with the aim of creating an undeconstructible survival machine” (p.9)?

In utilizing the implications of Freud’s late-career argument that the biblical Moses was Egyptian, not Jewish, Sloterdijk dubs as “Egyptian” Derrida’s premise that the nature of a subject necessarily contains its obverse; that “between the X as possible and the ‘same’ X as impossible, there is nothing but a relation of homonymy.”¹ Yet Sloterdijk takes the Egyptian theme further, effectively making it his structural loom upon which to thread, through the warp of deconstruction, thoughts on monotheism, and im/mortality; including the demise of philosophy as currently practiced. Perhaps the brightest thread in Sloterdijk’s tapestry is the idea that, within Egyptian culture is an object – the Pharaonic pyramid – that constitutes a subject extraordinary in its *inability* to be deconstructed “because it is built to look as it would after its own collapse.”

1 Jacques Derrida, “Et Cetera,” trans. Geoff Bennington, in *Deconstruction: A User's Guide*, ed. Nicolas Royle (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 300.

A small book of around 10,000 words, “Derrida an Egyptian” nevertheless deserves its stature as a stand-alone publication. It is a conceptual masterpiece. In its realized form, the work requires even the philosophically literate reader to be set down between each brief vignette to allow time for contemplation before moving on to the next chapter, and the next philosopher in Sloterdijk’s interrogatory list. However, the reader is set down upon the alluvial soil of the banks of Sloterdijk’s Nile, a soil made all the more fertile by the author’s love and comprehension of the work of Derrida as being representative of an age of immense, compass-less uncertainty, yet also as having divulged the hint of a way forward in philosophical practice in just such an epoch.

For Sloterdijk, Derrida was a thinker worthy of the utmost respect; a humble man who could hold two opposing thoughts in his mind without qualm; a philosopher who, as Sloterdijk records, stated in his final days that he “was certain that he would be forgotten as soon as he died, yet at the same time that something of his work would survive in the cultural memory” (p.vii).