

## Book Review

Simon O' Sullivan, *On the Production of Subjectivity*

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**S**IMON O'SULLIVAN'S EXCELLENT book sets out to do two important things. First, O'Sullivan swims upstream against a dominant current in contemporary continental thought by allowing for a key role for subjectivity. With the shift away from the phenomenological subject in recent decades, along with more recent developments in speculative realism where the effort is to move beyond correlationism and thus the relationship between reality as it is in itself and as given to a subject, the result has been a general turn away from the subject. O'Sullivan agrees with most of the concerns that one finds expressed regarding the phenomenological subject, and his interests also bears strong affinities with the work of the speculative realists (O'Sullivan's conclusion compares his project to the work of the leading speculative realists); however, and this is the second important thing O'Sullivan sets out to do, what is often missing in discussions of subjectivity is processual nature of the subject

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as a finite-infinite relation. Most of the approaches to the subject O'Sullivan examines in his series of "case studies" (p. 9) either attempt to move beyond the subject altogether or they erect a bar between the finite subject and an infinite reality that maintains a perpetual separation and lack of relation between them. By drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari in particular, O'Sullivan works through discussions of numerous key thinkers in the continental tradition to establish his "fundamental idea...that any subject comes after, or is secondary to, a given process that is primary." (p. 6).

In addition to O'Sullivan's philosophical concerns, there is also an important political motivation at work in this book; namely, rather than falling immediately into line with the processes that produce subjectivities that support capitalist forms of production, O'Sullivan is interested in the "deployment of slowness against the sometimes alienating speed of contemporary living." (4). Although this book "does not attend to the realm of politics per se," (5) it is certainly interested in the exploring the Bergsonian gap between stimulus and response, for it is in this gap, O'Sullivan claims, where one taps into the "virtuality" this gap "implicates [and which] defines our ability to creatively respond to a situation rather than simply habitually react." (141). In other words, O'Sullivan is interested in exploring the philosophical tradition for tools that can facilitate the creativity of alternative subjectivities, and it is the finite-infinite relation that provides the most robust account, according to O'Sullivan, of the processes that are open to producing subjects that are "not reducible to those lifestyle options typically on offer." (1).

In the first chapter O'Sullivan examines the work of three key figures—Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Bergson. The discussions here are brief, as O'Sullivan admits, and thus one may not draw from this or subsequent chapters the detailed scholarly analysis one finds in other books, but one will find that these discussions are put to the task of clarifying the finite-infinite relation. With Spinoza in particular, O'Sullivan is quite right to argue that what is significant about Spinoza's work is the radicalness in which he affirms the relation between the finite

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and the infinite. Whereas Descartes and Leibniz, for instance, maintain that we cannot, as finite subjects, come to know the nature of God as infinite, Spinoza does argue that with the third kind of knowledge we can indeed enter into relation with the infinite God we always already are. The section on Nietzsche extends these points by adding the important role of the unconscious whereby the body “is more intelligent than consciousness since it surpasses the simple – and reductive – idea which the latter has of the former.” (32). The body was also important for Spinoza as well, as evidenced by his claim at 5P39 from the *Ethics* that “He, who possesses a body capable of the greatest number of activities, possesses a mind whereof the greatest part is eternal.” What Nietzsche adds to the mix is the concept of unconscious, and hence of processes that are irreducible to consciousness and to the identifiable states of affairs that are the objects of consciousness. Bergson, finally, is important for O’Sullivan because he provides the concept of the gap and hesitation between stimulus and response, and with this gap as well comes the concept of the virtual, a concept that will loom large in the work of Deleuze and Guattari.

Before turning to the work of Guattari (chapter 3), Deleuze (chapter 4), and Deleuze and Guattari (chapter 5), O’Sullivan explores the similarities and differences between the work of Foucault and Lacan. On the surface Foucault’s later work appears to be quite at odds with Lacan’s, for while the latter sets out to undermine any emphasis upon the ego and turns instead to the production of a subject through processes that “cannot be reduced to a science” (85), Foucault’s ethical concerns that come to the fore in his work regarding the care of the self appear to be focused precisely on the concerns of the ego. With the help of Spinoza, however, or with the finite-infinite relation Spinoza gives us, O’Sullivan shows that the techniques and tools Foucault gives us are not intended to solidify and reinforce the ego but rather they “take the subject of him or herself” (68). Understood in this way, Foucault’s “ethical trajectory” is not at odds with Lacan’s project, and moreover they both provide tools to enable the productions

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of subjectivity that are irreducible to the “lifestyle options typically on offer” (1). As O’Sullivan puts it, for Foucault, one is “to treat one’s life [less] as an enigma – a riddle of desire to be deciphered – than as a work of aesthetic production.” (82).

The third chapter on Guattari is the pivotal chapter of this book, for it is here where O’Sullivan lays out the finite-infinite relation as he understands it. By drawing on Guattari’s *Chaosmosis*, O’Sullivan turns to what becomes an important theme as well in Deleuze and Guattari’s later work, especially *What is Philosophy?* (which O’Sullivan discusses in chapter 5). In this context, the infinite is understood as chaos, and the finite-infinite relations thus becomes the relation between chaos and the order that emerges out of chaos. In *What is Philosophy?* Deleuze and Guattari explicitly define chaos in terms of the infinite speeds with which things emerge and disappear, a speed that doesn’t allow for the connections that establish identifiable states or elements. In *Chaosmosis* as well, Guattari will emphasize the role complexity plays in allowing for the move beyond established patterns of the “subject-as-is” (a term O’Sullivan uses). “The key intention here,” as O’Sullivan summarizes it, “is to complexify rather than reduce the components that make up any given instance of subjectivity.” (104). O’Sullivan’s turn to complexity theory is helpful at this point, and quite in line with what Guattari and Deleuze and Guattari do explicitly in their own work.

One of the strengths of O’Sullivan’s book is that he is able to motivate the move towards Deleuze and Guattari in order to lay out the finite-infinite relation as a process that is irreducible to the subject-as-is, or to any determinate, identifiable state for that matter. There are some residual questions, however, and some points that could use further clarification to flesh out precisely how Deleuze and Guattari account for the finite-infinite relation. First and foremost what is needed is for O’Sullivan to clarify what he means by the infinite. The infinite is used many times by Deleuze and Guattari – they define chaos by its infinite speeds and multiplicity is referred to an infinitely doubled difference – but how is this use of the infinite related to Spinoza’s, or Badiou’s (who in turn draws

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heavily upon Cantor's theory of the infinite)? Within the philosophical tradition, for example, there is an important distinction between what Hegel called the good and bad infinite, which is related to Aristotle's distinction between that which is actually and that which is potentially infinite. Hegel, for instance, will criticize Spinoza for succumbing to the bad infinite, to an infinite that is always in excess of any finite number and is thus not in relation to the finite, whereas for Hegel the good infinite is just that which every finite entity presupposes. With Hegel, in other words, we already have a philosopher who affirms the finite-infinite relation. With the influence Hegel has had on recent philosophers such as Slavoj Žižek (who is also extending the work of Lacan) and Adrian Johnston, it would have further supported O'Sullivan's cause if he had explored these issues a bit further.

Despite the concerns regarding O'Sullivan's account of the nature of the infinite, and hence the finite-infinite relation, the general trajectory of O'Sullivan's arguments are to this reader right on target. O'Sullivan is quite right to draw the line between Deleuze and Guattari, and his own project, and a host of other contemporary philosophers, at precisely this point—do they or do they not allow for the finite-infinite relation. In the case of Badiou, for instance, which O'Sullivan discusses in chapter 4, O'Sullivan correctly argues that despite affirmations to the contrary Badiou does not fully account and allow for the relation between the finite and the infinite. In the end, O'Sullivan argues that for Badiou “the subject is closed off from the infinite of which it is an operator.” (137). This conclusion would have rung much more loudly and clearly had some of the issues regarding the infinite mentioned above been given further attention, but the conclusion O'Sullivan draws is nonetheless an important conclusion and ought to generate further discussion of the finite-infinite relation.

In the final chapter O'Sullivan compares his own project to the work of philosophers in what has come to be called speculative realism. In brief sections on Quentin Meillassoux, Reza Negarestani, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier, and Iain Hamilton Grant, O'Sullivan argues that his own project

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involves a speculative component, engaged as it is in the processes involved in what O'Sullivan calls the "speculative subject" (210). This speculative subject, however, is not the knowing subject for whom the problem is one of access to the real, or of knowing the real as it is in itself rather than as given to the subject; to the contrary, the speculative subject is one with the infinite processes that are the world itself. The Spinozism of O'Sullivan's project comes into sharper focus at this point for the finite-infinite relation is simply the processes of the one infinite substance - what Guattari and later Deleuze and Guattari call chaosmos. The subject-as-is, therefore, is only a secondary phenomenon, as we have seen above, but more importantly is an effect of primary processes that are simply processes of the chaosmos itself. Deleuze will discuss such effects as quasi-effects in order to emphasize the fact that the subject-as-is is not an independent correlate of the primary processes but rather is in reciprocal determination with the infinite substance. The infinite chaosmos is the flip side of the subject-as-is, and it is the side that allows for the transformation of subjectivities, or for the emergence of subjects that are "not reducible to those lifestyle options typically on offer." (1). We can now understand the motivation behind O'Sullivan's claim "a probe of sorts has already been sent in to the absolute and that the name of this probe is the subject when this is understood as specifically not the subject-as-is, but a speculative subject that is always in process, always, as it were, becoming-world." (210).

O'Sullivan's *On the Production of Subjectivity* is an important contribution to contemporary continental thought. What are on offer here are some important tools that allow us to rethink our relations to ourselves, others, and the world. O'Sullivan makes a strong case that now, perhaps more than ever, it is critical to explore ways in which alternative subjectivities may be produced that are not subordinate to the contemporary exigencies of capitalist forms of production. To this extent, therefore, O'Sullivan has fulfilled his hope that his book, "even in its most abstract parts... [become a] point of inspiration - for others in their own lives and in their own project of the production of subjectivity." (222).