

REVIEW

Simon O'Sullivan, *On the Production of Subjectivity: Five Diagrams of the Finite-Infinite Relation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), ISBN: 978-0-230-24980-6

In Simon O'Sullivan's ambitious and erudite *On the Production of Subjectivity: Five Diagrams of the Finite-Infinite Relation*, the author explores the possibility of thinking subjectivity as a process of creative and pragmatic formation of new ways of life in a world that has moved beyond the foundational subject—what O'Sullivan calls "the subject-as-is." The author defines his project on two levels. On the speculative level, his purpose is to:

foreground subjectivity over and above the subject, when the latter is understood as a single homogenized entity. It is also to emphasize the processual nature of this subjectivity as always a work in progress: an ethical and aesthetic programme aimed at producing a certain kind of autonomy contra the dominant technologies of subjection of our present moment. We might say then that this subjectivity is both pragmatic and speculative in the sense that its production must be carried out in our contemporary world, but that it is not reducible to those lifestyle options that are typically on offer. The present book is concerned with the production of what we might call future-oriented diagrams of this different kind of subjectivity (1).

On a personal/political level, the book functions as an attempt "to think alternative models for the production of subjectivity beyond those proffered by neo-liberalism which, despite its claims, increasingly produces an alienated, atomized and homogenized individual" (4). Thus, in the spirit of Foucault, the processes of writing and thinking become themselves practices of the self, as O'Sullivan acknowledges in his conclusion (221). For O'Sullivan, diagrams and diagramming (in other words, representing discursive thought visually) provide a useful tool for thinking through, depicting, and communicating philosophical models and concepts. However, readers might find the author's diagrams compelling or not, depending on their discipline. For an individual who is not trained in this particular way of visualizing thought, it may be difficult to interact with the diagrams in a productive way.

A basic premise of the text is that subjectivity has been colonized by the forces of capitalism; O'Sullivan simply calls these forces "Capital." Following the Italian thinker Antonio Negri, he argues that we live in a world of "total subsumption of capital" (192) that sees "the implementation of Capital as ordering principle of lived life and the concomitant reduction of heterogeneous multiplicity to the principle of exchange" (93). In this statement, we can hear echoes of Foucault's claim that the subject has come to be formed largely by forces of disci-

pline and biopower, a resonance that O'Sullivan acknowledges (113). Indeed, the author argues, as does Foucault, that it is this ordering principle that subjects individuals in increasingly homogenous and normalized ways (93). O'Sullivan then claims, in terms of his own project, "[c]apitalism's reduction of subjectivity and of life in general is countered by a call for a complexification and resingularization that, rather than closing down on mutation, opens itself up ever further to creativity and invention" (111-12). In other words, he believes that the subject-as-is is defined by habitual patterns of behavior that undergird the capitalist system, and the goal of the "ethico-aesthetic process," understood as creative self-transformation, should be the creation of new ways of life (187-88).

In order to think through various models of how to construct this future-oriented subjectivity, O'Sullivan engages with the work of a number of historical and contemporary figures—primarily Spinoza, Bergson, Nietzsche, Lacan, Foucault, Guattari, and Badiou—through the lens of Gilles Deleuze. It is no secret that O'Sullivan is a Deleuzian; his three previous books focus on Deleuze, and Deleuze is the animating principle of the present book as well. During many of his exegeses, O'Sullivan mobilizes Deleuze's interpretation of the thinkers in question alongside his own. There are many possible reasons why he values the work of Deleuze, especially in collaboration with Guattari, but the main reasons seem to be as follows. First, obviously, there is the issue of the diagram. Deleuze's work also utilizes visual representations of knotty philosophical issues; in fact "the fold," the modeling of subjectivity as the folding in of the outside that Deleuze puts forth in his monograph on Foucault, comes to play a primary role in O'Sullivan's concept of subjectivity.¹ Second, O'Sullivan is at pains to argue against the Kantian legacy that he sees in contemporary thinkers of subjectivity—such as Alan Badiou and the Speculative Realists whom he discusses in the conclusion—a legacy that continues to insist upon a gap between the infinite and the finite. In contrast, O'Sullivan posits a continuum between the finite and the infinite, the inside and the outside as it were. Whereas a thinker such as Badiou imagines an outside that is radically inaccessible to the subject as finite entity, "Deleuze is always at pains to point out, the virtual does not lack existence, but only needs to be actualized" (128-29). Moreover, the actual and the virtual, the finite and the infinite, are mutually—constituting (138). Thus the subject in this model, "is always already eternal, composed of different relations between these two fields" (100). Therefore, for O'Sullivan, Deleuze's work provides a corrective to neo-Kantian thinking in that the production of subjectivity occurs on a plane encompassing both the finite and the infinite. The final reason that mobilizing Deleuze is crucial to O'Sullivan's project is that he furnishes a way of conceptualizing the future orientation of the becoming subject, mainly through aesthetic practice. As O'Sullivan states, "it is the future orientation of practices such as art and philosophy that holds [Deleuze and Guattari's] interest insofar as they are oriented toward a specifically *different* future to the one which is determined by the already existing logics of the present" (197). For O'Sullivan, contemporary art is particularly valuable because art is ontologically creative and experimental; art "is 'made' in the present, out of the materials at hand, but its 'content' often calls for a subjectivity to come" (200).

¹ This diagram, which O'Sullivan takes from Deleuze's book on Foucault, appears on page 74.

For those familiar with Foucault's work, much of the language of O'Sullivan's book will be recognizable: virtualities, thinking otherwise, creating a way of life, transforming oneself through practice, etcetera. O'Sullivan even mobilizes the Foucauldian language of the negotiation between subjection—the societal forces that constitute the subject—and subjectivation—the subject's constitution of herself (7). However, two main issues arise concerning the author's use of Foucault. First, the stated purpose of the chapter dedicated to Foucault and Lacan is to attempt to synthesize the two thinkers, largely by aligning Foucault with the Lacanian project. O'Sullivan expounds Lacan's thesis that traditional ethics is in "service of goods" that "invariably involves '[t]he cleaning up of desire,'" and which functions as "the morality of the master, created for the virtues of the master and linked to the order of powers" (63). As an introduction to his reading of Foucault against Lacan, O'Sullivan then states, "[i]s Foucault's 'Care of the Self' part of that ethical tradition that Lacan undermines, or does it in fact involve a different understanding of ethics that brings it closer to the psychoanalytic program itself" (60)? From the perspective of Foucault's thought concerning the production of subjectivity, one can only answer this question with: neither. Moreover, O'Sullivan's desire to bring the two thinkers closer together by claiming, for instance, that Foucault's concept of *parrhēsia*, or frank speech, "would seem to prefigure the analyst's couch, albeit it was a public exercise" (85), or "it seems to me that this question of practice ultimately, is the key difference between these two thinkers in their understanding of the ethical subject" (85) ignores the very real differences in their theories of the subject. In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* and throughout the lectures, interviews, and essays of his late period, Foucault critiques the psychoanalytic project of discovering one's inner truth² through examination and confession. In the interview from which O'Sullivan draws some of his evidence, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," Foucault clarifies the difference between the modern cult of the self and the culture of the self he focuses on in Greek and Roman thought:

In the California cult of the self, one is supposed to discover one's true self, to separate it from that which might obscure or alienate it, to decipher its truth thanks to psychological or psychoanalytic science, which is supposed to be able to tell you what your true self is. Therefore, not only do I not identify this ancient culture of the self with what you might call the Californian cult of the self, I think they are diametrically opposed.³

Despite O'Sullivan's inclination to downplay these differences, he partially acknowledges Foucault's rejection of interiority. In his discussion of Foucault's aesthetics of existence as it plays out in his commentary on Baudelaire, O'Sullivan states "[i]ndeed, *contra* Lacan, '[m]odern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets, his inner truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself" (83). So, while the issue of constituting oneself through practice does mark a difference between Lacan and Foucault, the main difference lies in their belief in an interiority that one must discover and to which one must be faithful. Foucault acknowledges no such inner truth, but rather urges his readers to transform

² What Lacan would call *das Ding* (71).

³ Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: Overview of a Work in Progress" in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The New Press, 1994), 253-280, 271.

their lives through an embodied engagement with the world—much like Deleuze and Guattari.

The second point of contention comes from the use of Deleuze as a lens on Foucault. O'Sullivan takes the concept of "the fold" to heart, which does not present a problem as concerns his own thinking on subjectivity. In fact, the idea of a folding in of the outside, as depicted in Deleuze's diagram, is a fascinating way of conceptualizing the processual nature of subjectivity. However, one must acknowledge that this is Deleuze's reading of Foucault, not Foucault's own perspective on the issue. In his late work on ethics, Foucault never mentions folds or folding, specifically. In fact, he seems to have no interest in the issue of diagramming at all. He is much more likely to describe the process of subjectivation as a process of conversion,⁴ or as "the subjectivation of a true discourse in a practice and exercise of oneself on oneself."⁵ Similarly, while Deleuze argues that "the 'proper' name of this continuous folding of the outside is memory (74) and therefore "[m]emory is the real name of the relation to oneself" (75), I would argue that for Foucault, the relationship of self to self is defined by care. While this review does not offer sufficient room to expand upon Foucault's own understanding of the production of subjectivity, it seems important to note the differences here between Foucault's own thought, and Deleuze's quite valid interpretation of that thought, as it is mobilized by O'Sullivan.

Finally, I offer a *mea culpa* that might similarly apply to other readers of *Foucault Studies*. I am a scholar of Foucault; I have only passing knowledge of other contemporary philosophers, especially given the fact that Foucault's late work focuses mainly on classical sources. As O'Sullivan himself notes, his book is fairly technical, the prose itself being supplemented by diagrams, philosophical equations, and sixty-two pages of dense notes. While the text illuminates many aspects of the contemporary conversation on subjectivity, as well as bringing into conversation seminal historical thinkers, it seems better suited for a reader with a firm grasp on O'Sullivan's major conversation partners, especially Deleuze and Guattari, and secondarily Alan Badiou. This book would be an excellent source for a scholar looking to unravel Deleuze and Guattari's thought on subjectivity, especially in conversation with other contemporary thinkers. However, it would be less appropriate for laymen, or for someone interested specifically in Foucauldian subjectivity. *On the Production of Subjectivity* is a far-ranging and rollicking ride, and sometimes it is a little difficult to hang on.

Tara Marie Dankel
Harvard University
Committee on the Study of Religion
Barker Center
12 Quincy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (New York: Picador, 2005), 15.

⁵ *Ibid* 333.