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Pascal Chabot, *The Philosophy of Simondon: Between Technology and Individuation*. Trans. Aliza Krefetz and Graeme Kirkpatrick. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. ix+156 pp. \$100.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 1780930321

Review by Mark Hayward, York University.

The translation of Pascal Chabot's *The Philosophy of Simondon: Between Technology and Individuation* is an important addition to the growing number of texts that help to contextualize and explain the writing of the late French philosopher. First published in 2003, the translation of Chabot's text is an indication that the revival of interest in Gilbert Simondon's work that started shortly after his death in 1989 has made its way to Anglophone audiences. This book, along with Muriel Combes' *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual* and the collection of essays gathered in *Gilbert Simondon: Between Being and Technology*, provide the interested reader with the necessary resources to develop an understanding of Simondon's thought and the context from which it has emerged.[1] These texts focusing on Simondon's oeuvre build upon the numerous citations of his name already found in the work of Adrian Mackenzie, Mark Hansen, and Brian Massumi among others.[2] That Simondon's name is often known before his writing will make the experience of reading Chabot's text as much a "return" as a new discovery for many readers.

The strength of Chabot's book is the clarity with which it introduces and clarifies the key concepts in Simondon's thought. The book offers several chapters that explain these. The first chapter on technical objects (pp. 9-22) and the second section on "Individuation" (covering chapters five to nine) provide a wealth of examples taken from Simondon's work and elsewhere to give the reader an understanding of the unique structure and vocabulary of the Simondonian approach. The other strength of the text is the detail with which it explains the relationship between his writing and the work of other thinkers. While many have praised the originality of Simondon's philosophy, Chabot's work makes clear that Simondon's contributions draw in part from his ability to synthesize diverse bodies of research as part of the development of his own philosophical system. So, while Chabot recognizes that Simondon brought a new "way of thinking of about the modes of existence of individuals and objects" (p. 3), he dedicates significant space in the text to exploring how Simondon interpreted and appropriated the work of cybernetics and positivism as well as the writings of Bergson, Marx and Jung.

Of course, all expositions of another's work are also works of translation and Chabot's text is not different. For Chabot, it is the relationship between humans and technique as a privileged example of the novel conceptualization of the relationship between subject and object that is given the most prominent consideration in the text as a whole. Accordingly, the trajectory of the book is one that puts forward an ethics of technology and what Xavier Guchet among others has described as Simondon's "technological humanism." [3] We might take Chabot's final summation of Simondon to speak more broadly of his estimation of his contribution, when he writes that we should understand his work as

"that of an honest man in an age of technology, a man who opposes technology, a man literally *seized* by an awareness of the human facility for creating slaves and exploiting the gestures of others. That of an

optimist who calls for reform of the conception of labour, because our societies have lost in passion what they have gained in mechanism” (p. 153).

In this passage, Chabot explicitly links Simondon’s reconceptualization of technology as “technical object”—highlighting the internal dynamics of the evolution of technique as much as its function as a tool or instrument—to a broader egalitarian project that requires reconsidering the categorization of, and relationship between, the things identified as subjects (here, humans) and objects (technology and machines). In this regard, Chabot is elaborating the claims put forward at the outset of *Du mode d’existence des objets techniques* likening machinery to modern slaves and seeing here the primary source of contemporary alienation (a topic that Chabot discusses in detail in chapter three in relation to Marx’s definition of the same term).

The version of Simondon that Chabot presents is notably different from the ‘political’ Simondon that has been elaborated most notably in the work of Muriel Combes.<sup>[4]</sup> For Chabot, it is Simondon’s engagement with technology, and the conceptualization of the technical object and its evolution, that are the centre of his thought. While Chabot is hardly a polemicist, it is apparent that his interest in Simondon is not overly influenced by the appropriation of his work by Gilles Deleuze and his followers (such as Brian Massumi). This is less a question of radically opposing other approaches to Simondon’s work than it is a matter of relative emphasis. It is for this reason that it is perhaps recommended that this book be read in tandem with Combes’ text since the two offer complementary, yet differing approaches to Simondon as well as providing a better understanding of the way in which Simondon’s work can be interpreted.

In support of the overview of Simondon’s work he offers, Chabot draws upon both published and unpublished work to give a sense not just of the key terms in his philosophy, but also a better understanding of the way in which these concepts developed over the course of his career. This is perhaps the most significant aspect of the book since many discussions of Simondon’s work deal with his contribution to process-oriented ontologies and the philosophy of technology, yet do not recognize the peculiarity of the publication history of the works that are widely available. The two major texts published by Simondon, *Du mode d’existence des objets techniques* and *L’individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d’information*, were both written within five years of each other to fulfill the requirements for his doctorate.<sup>[5]</sup> The continuity and historical proximity of these works has been obscured by their delayed publication, spanning almost forty years between their initial composition and public availability in French. In his discussion of the development and complexity of Simondon’s work, Chabot goes beyond these two primary texts to examine Simondon’s later writings, drawing on course notes, unpublished manuscripts and essays that have received only limited circulation outside of France (of which many have been anthologized and made widely available over the past decade thanks to the work of Jean-Yves Chateau and Simondon’s heirs).

At the same time, Chabot’s desire to reconcile the breadth of Simondon’s writing raises questions about the best way to approach this body of work. As Chabot writes at the beginning of the third part of the book, entitled “The Bridges,” “Simondon’s oeuvre stands on two pillars, and the bridge that links them has not yet been constructed. Technical concretization and individuation appear to be self-contained concepts” (p. 107). The task of this third section is to build the bridge between these two pillars, leaving aside “the question of whether Simondon might have wished to make explicit the nature of this connection had he produced a third volume of writings” (p. 107). For Chabot, the recent development of technology has provoked a better understanding of how Simondon’s two major contributions to contemporary philosophy might be integrated with each other. Chabot writes from the vantage point of 2003 and reading his text more than a decade later there is no reason to believe that he would feel any less certain about this claim in light of recent developments in information technology and communication media.

Yet, the temptation to systematize and consolidate the ideas of Simondon in order to produce a comprehensive philosophy of contemporary technical experience should not be welcomed without the requisite wariness. If the concepts that Simondon developed in his writing continue to speak to the present moment, it should be recognized that this ongoing relevance has taken shape through processes of appropriation and re-contextualization. This is to recognize that Simondon's attempts at building a comprehensive philosophical system, both mythical and metaphysical in scope, always stood in tension with the peculiar way in which he interpreted and synthesized the work of others. For this reason, alongside his philosophy of technical objects and critique of individuation, the idea of the "disparate" should be added as a necessary complement and counterbalance.

The term appears at numerous points in Simondon's writing, and plays an important role in the development of his thought. The term "disparation," which Simondon seems to have appropriated from optics, could be seen as the engine through which processes of individuation and transindividuation take place. It appears in his discussion of information, where it describes the movement between scales that occurs through the transformation of relations between disparate orders and scales of being.[6] In a discussion of Simondon's relevance for political thought, Alberto Toscano notes that Simondon uses the term disparation to describe a "non-dialectical but nevertheless political conceptualisation of conflict and transformation." [7]

It is unfortunate that Chabot's focus on technical objects and individuation gives relatively little space to the way in which heterogeneity and the transformative potential of disparation are situated within Simondon's thought. However, suggesting that Chabot's discussion of Simondon could benefit from giving greater emphasis to disparation, and the open and on-going transformation of relations between disparate objects and registers of being, is not meant to be taken as a call for greater adherence to Simondon's original texts. Rather, it is put forward with the intention of reminding the reader of Simondon's work that its generative capacity—its status as thinking rather than just the inscription of a complete system—comes from his continued engagement with the open integration of the different and the disparate. In this regard, Chabot's text is highly recommended as a place to begin an engagement with the work of Gilbert Simondon. However, it is also recommended that such an engagement maintain and continue the kind of openness to the mode of existence and methods of thought that Simondon followed throughout his career.

## NOTES

[1] Muriel Combes, *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013); Arne De Boever, Alex Murray, Jon Roffe and Ashley Woodward, eds., *Gilbert Simondon: Being and Technology*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

[2] Adrian Mackenzie, *Transductions: Bodies and machines at speed*, (London: Continuum, 2006); Mark B.N. Hansen, *New philosophy for new media* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT press, 2004); Brian Massumi, "'Technical Mentality' revisited: Brian Massumi on Gilbert Simondon." *Parrhesia* 7 (2009): 36-45.

[3] Xavier Guchet. *Pour un humanisme technologique: Culture, technique et société dans la philosophie de Gilbert Simondon* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2010).

[4] Muriel Combes, *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2013).

[5] Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1969); Gilbert Simondon, *L'individu et sa genèse physico-biologique* (Grenoble: Editions Jérôme Millon, 1995).

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[6] Gilbert Simondon, *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*. (Grenoble: Editions Jérôme Millon, 2005), p 205-211.

[7] Alberto Toscano, "The Disparate: Ontology and Politics in Simondon." *Society of European Philosophy/Forum for European Philosophy Annual Conference, University of Sussex*. 2007.

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