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## Book Review: *The Reject: Community, Politics and Religion after the Subject* by Irving Goh



*In **The Reject: Community, Politics and Religion after the Subject**, Irving Goh draws upon and discusses a wide variety of twentieth-century French thinkers in order to elucidate ‘the reject’ as not only a crucial figure of thought for the contemporary world, but also as traceable throughout the course of philosophical histories. Outlining the relationship between Goh’s notion of ‘the reject’ and existing conceptions of ‘the subject’, Bjarke Mørkøre Stigel Hansen welcomes Goh’s impassioned contextualisation and defence of the reject as a textual and empirical figure as a timely addition to the literature.*

***The Reject: Community, Politics and Religion after the Subject.* Irving Goh. Fordham University Press. 2015.**

Irving Goh’s *The Reject: Community, Politics and Religion after the Subject* is an ambitious attempt to bring together ‘contemporary French thought’ and the ‘contemporary world’ under the common articulation of ‘the *reject*, as a figure that *all of us* undeniably or even irreducibly assume at some point in time in our lives’ (x-xi). Goh develops and defends the claim that ‘the *reject* is a critical figure of thought for the contemporary world’, and therefore that one must ‘articulate it without further hesitation

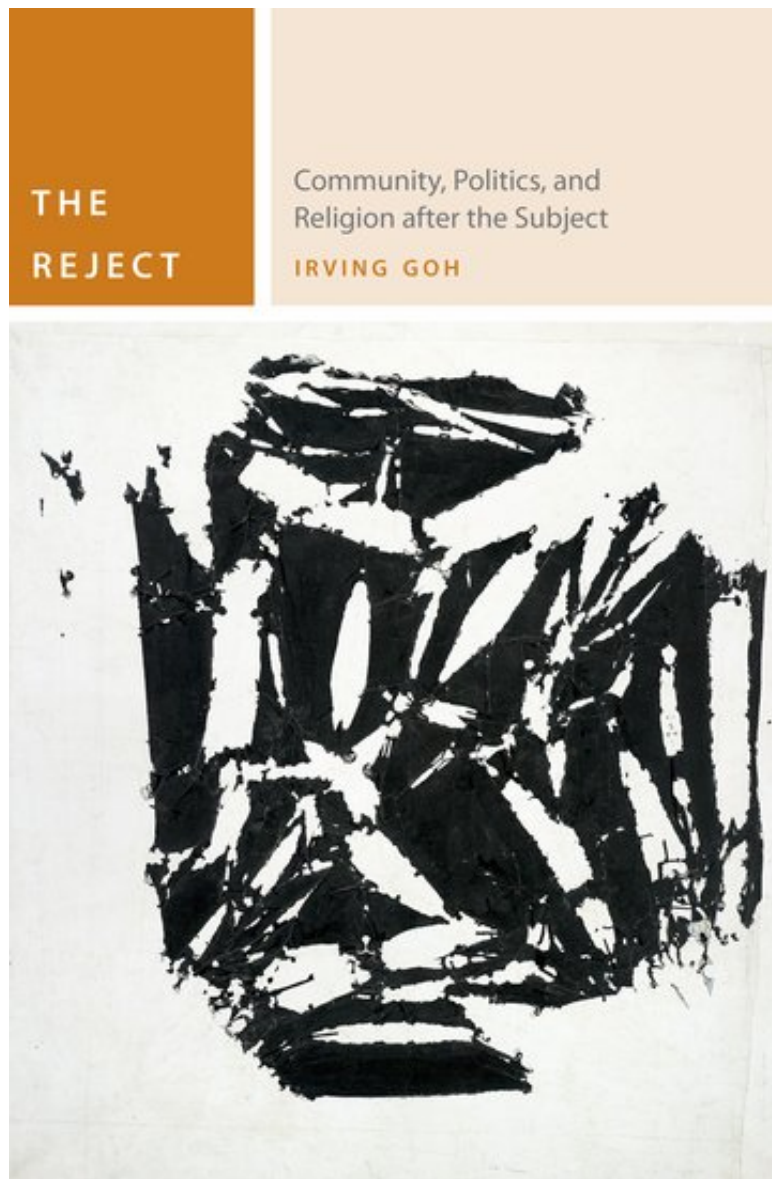


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or reservation' (xii). This claim is supported by a detailed study of the



development of the conception of *the reject*, which has been, as Goh argues, 'with philosophy right at its beginning' (13).

Because of the vast variety of thinkers cited in the work – Nancy, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, Cixous, Clément, Badiou, Balibar, Rancière, just to mention a few – this review will focus on Goh's main concern in his book, which is to open up thought and existence to other forms of relations, politics, religious and human life that go beyond, if not are *impossible* to, their present 'appellations or conceptualizations' (251).

The stated aim of the book is twofold. On the one hand, to give an examination of the *reject* in line with the philosophical tradition to which Goh subscribes, in order to make a critical intervention in the contexts of social media, the postsecular condition and the deadlock of political democratic thought after 9/11. On the other hand, to consider how current developments in the questions of

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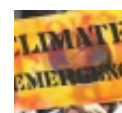
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community, love and friendship, religion, politics and the posthuman interest in animal and bacterial life and system theories can 'refine or define a theory of the *reject*' (23) based on the critical backdrop of the first unfolding. Goh pushes contemporary French thought to its limits:

*not just to elicit it [the challenge of theorising the reject today] from within safe textual boundaries and elucidate it "on paper", but also to contextualize it amidst the irreducible and undeniable fact of existing with others in the real world [...], the contextualization within both textual and empirical domains (24).*

It is here that the analysis of the *reject* intersects with the 'sort of guiding thought' that consistently leads Goh's work towards 'a thought "without subject"' (16). For Goh, there is a need to abandon 'all suppositions of the *subject*' (240). This claim is supported in Chapter One, 'Let's Drop the Subject', in which Goh studies the development of the conception of the *subject* in twentieth-century French thought. It is the modern conception of the *subject* that, according to Goh, ultimately carries itself beyond itself, and thus points towards the *reject* as a gesture of, and for, thought.



Image Credit: Nicolás Espinosa ([Wikimedia Commons](#))

It might be helpful to look at what is implied in this history of the *subject*, for, besides constituting the theoretical background concerning the need for a theory of the *reject*, it goes directly to the heart of discussions on the *subject*, which, in many respects, bring along with them the effect of opacity. Let's have a go at it.

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On his sea journey through the history of philosophy, Hegel exclaims: 'Here...we are home and, like the sailor who has journeyed on the stormy sea for a long time, cry: "Land-ho!"' It is with Descartes's discovery of the cogito that we enter into the new philosophy of the world, an *independent* philosophy, according to which the becoming independent of philosophy is a becoming independent of the subject: that is, the subject that grasps itself in its reflection upon itself.

Especially through Heidegger's account of Hegel's report on the discovery of the *philosophy of the subject* – the discovery of the solid ground upon which philosophy can truly settle – the resilient interpretation of the *subject*, understood as that which already lies before, comes to the fore in twentieth-century thought. Yet, during this same century, a critical confrontation with the philosophy of the subject has also taken place. To put it all too simply, the subject has been rejected in view of a liquidation of the subject, which in turn presupposes and affirms the very subjectivity that calls for liquidation.

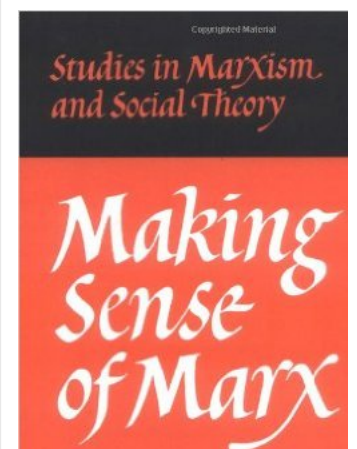
Drawing on the question that Nancy posed in 1986 – 'Who comes after the subject?' – Goh presents an ambitious attempt to explain and defend the urgency to go back to Nancy's question and an 'attempt at that more adequate response' (4). Goh's response to the promise of Nancy's question is: the *reject*. As a counter-strategy to the attempt either to liquidate or to adhere to the *subject*, Goh argues that the *reject* names the opening up of a figure other than the *subject*, without, however, rejecting the *subject*.

Goh's argument about the *reject* assumes three constitutive turns: I). The *passive reject* understood as the target of denigration or abandonment (7); II). The active force of the *reject*, which consists in rejecting the external forces that repress it (e.g. the *subject*). The active *reject* may even reject others to the degree that it is rendered a *reject* also by those self-same others. However, resistance to the *subject* is not a matter of annihilating that which is resisted, because the *reject* would then only repeat 'the gesture of that which it counteracts' (249); and III). The auto-

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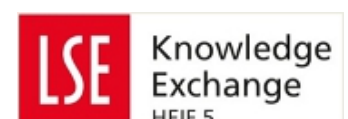
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reject: 'the *reject*'s turning of the force of rejection around on itself' (7, 249-50). With this third turn of the *reject* in mind, Goh takes the necessary precaution of not allowing itself to 'overassert itself; instead, it will be more critical to put in effect the third turn of the *auto-reject*' (25-26). For Goh, this leads to an ethical dimension of the singular question of the *reject*: the other, before the *auto-reject*, is always free to depart, always free even to *not* arrive before the auto-reject. This is an ethics that 'always modulates itself, at every instant, as different beings come into contact with one another at each time' (26, 224).

Goh's impassioned defence of a figure of thought that comes *after* the subject, rejecting any presupposed structure of subjectivity, is a welcome addition to the literature, which often seems, as Goh convincingly argues, to have forgotten the problem of the *reject*, traceable throughout the course of philosophy's histories. What is more, by implying that a 'theory of the *reject* cannot rest content to be just a matter of textual elucidation: it must go beyond conceptual rhetoric and suggest at least potential empirical applications' (97), Goh, for example, attends to a case analysis of the Occupy movement based on **Bartleby's dictum**, 'I would prefer not to', which, instead of knowing 'when to walk away' (190), occupies a space on which it grounds itself as a sovereign *subject*. Yet, despite his insistence on the *reject* as that which never 'demands the total disclosure of the other' (214), it remains unclear, I think, as to whether Goh's eventual focus on the 'need [for] a theory of the *reject*' (23) might lead to a privileging of *the* reject, whilst downplaying other aspects of the question of the *subject*.

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**Book Review: The Reject: Community, Politics and Religion after the Subject by Irving Goh : Democratic Audit UK** 11/15/2015 at 8:31 am - [Reply](#)

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