

The Language of Real Life:

Communication in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Politics

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As a radical philosophical practice, phenomenology goes to the roots of conscious experience. And if, as Marx and Engels put it, “Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process,”¹ then the radicality of phenomenological enquiry can take on a political dimension. A materialist commitment of sorts is evident in the work of Merleau-Ponty—where the concern is not so much for the economic but rather the bodily basis of culture. The underlying thesis of his monumental text *Phenomenology of Perception* is that in perception we find a nascent structure for various forms of experiencing the world, including the social world. This approach deals with the most initial and spontaneous experience of politics, rather than starting with an account of structures that do not consider our existence and participation within them. As such, I will look at the implications of understanding political consciousness as first and foremost a perceptual consciousness. It is in his writings on perception that we find Merleau-Ponty's most provocative and productive contributions to political thought, rather than his explicit forays into Stalinism and Hegelian Marxism. What instead emerges is an anti-determinist and anti-essentialist Marxist politics.

In these descriptions, Merleau-Ponty reveals to us that consciousness is essentially communication—not a transparent, volitional, or static formation of meaning, but instead a relation of intentionality between the subject and object of perception. It is the occasion for a meeting and exchange between subject and object, where knowledge arises out of both sides of the relation. Like a dialogue, this is a

¹ Marx and Engels 154

temporal process of continuous reciprocity. Even if the roles played are unbalanced at times, there is still an underlying mutual dependence between subject and object in consciousness.

For Merleau-Ponty, subjectivity is essentially open. But to understand his conception of subjectivity, we need to appreciate that the subject of perception is the body and not simply embodied (i.e. an essentially immaterial essence inhabiting an objectified body). If, “my body is as it were a ‘natural’ subject, a provisional sketch of my total being,”² as Merleau-Ponty suggests, then what kind of structure of subjectivity can we gather from his account of it? According to him, “Synaesthetic perception is the rule.”³ That is, different modes of sensation are able to coordinate and intersect in the body. For example, by looking at a box, I can *see* that it is smooth or hard; I do not have to feel it with my hands. As an everyday occurrence, we have the crossover of various fields of sensation and sense qualities: in the above example, the tactile is registered visually. This mundane sort of synaesthesia can happen because “[t]he senses intercommunicate by opening on to the structure of the thing.”⁴ This mutual implication of different modes of experience establishes the body as a communicative structure, which in turn allows it to access other structures of meaning.

Communication with the world initiates the subject’s relation to itself: it is by opening on to the thing that the senses start to cooperate amongst themselves. The body could thus also be said to be constituted through its intentionality, or as Merleau-Ponty expresses it, the body *qua* subject is “an expressive unity”⁵. Rather than an original unity, it is a process of encountering and being rooted in the world

² Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 231

³ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 266

⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 266

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 239

that will vary in practice. Sense experience provides the body with the occasion to synthesize its own various parts and functions. Merleau-Ponty writes, "I have the positing of objects through that of my body, or conversely the positing of my body through that of objects, not in any kind of logical implication...but in a real implication, and because my body is a movement towards the world, and the world my body's point of support."⁶ The subject is thus inside the world and outside itself. Communication does not just characterize the subject's relation to its object or "external" environment; it constitutes the embodied subject itself. Yet, this communication *qua* subject is always already a relation with the "outside." The perceiver and the perceived are held together through what Merleau-Ponty calls the "intentional tissue."⁷ The opposition between inside and outside begins to break down.

In a phenomenology of perception, we cannot apply the Platonic distinction between form and matter: "It is necessary that meaning and signs, the form and matter of perception, be related from the beginning."⁸ The object of perception does not refer, like a sign, to a separate realm of meaning; the sign (or in contemporary terms, the signifier) is not empty. The meaning of objects is *manifested*, as opposed to produced, in consciousness. The dualism between the ideal and material needs to be rethought when we acknowledge the sensuousness, or materiality, of meaning. In the words of Judith Butler, matter "is neither a simple, brute positivity or referent nor a blank surface or slate awaiting an external signification."⁹

Without the perceiving subject, however, meaning stays locked in its perishable form. For Merleau-Ponty, "There is an autochthonous significance of the

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 408

⁷ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 61

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, "Perception" 15

⁹ Butler, Bodies 31

world which is constituted in the dealings which our incarnate existence has with it.”¹⁰ Sense is present from the start yet constituted because we are a part of this whole. If we are so deeply implicated, then the boundary between the inside and outside of the object is also permeable. The object of perception is autonomous, yet not indifferent insofar as it contains meanings for the subject. The enabling factors of this engagement will be the subject’s perceptivity, a sensitivity that has individual aspects but also has socially constituted, or ideological, aspects. The subject and intentional object are formed in and through dialogue.

Ambiguity not only characterizes the structure of this relationship, but also its content. In the *Phenomenology of Perception*, “the perceived, by its nature, admits of the ambiguous, the shifting, and is shaped by its context.”¹¹ The object is suggestive; its fragmentary meaning engages and beckons the subject. Once this already present significance is perceived, we do not have the total completion of a unitary content. Ambiguity does not collapse difference determinately, but rather it is a shift in connotation or the simultaneity of distinct expressions in a spatial and/or temporal context. Thus, Merleau-Ponty insists that “[w]e must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon....Its meaning is an equivocal meaning; we are concerned with an expressive value rather than with logical signification.”¹² Ambiguity is motivated by the conditions of its formation: dialogue is the relation between various distinct parties in which significances are never fully owned by either side. It is an exchange and reworking that proceeds through various shifts. We see that in perception, signification is multiple, indeterminate, and never final.

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 512

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 13

¹² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 7

Context and theme inform one another. It is in this process of ‘dialogue’ that one can transform into the other, and the ambiguity of meaning can arise. We have a world of diffuse, latent significance that we can shift between, that go from being implicit to explicit and determinate to indeterminate within perception, neither state absolute nor static.

Communication is a dynamic process that highlights temporality as a key feature of perception. Because of time, neither the object of perception nor the subject is ever fully revealed in self-consciousness. Merleau-Ponty notes, “The unity of either the subject or the object is not a real unity, but a presumptive unity on the horizon of experience.”¹³ Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology deals with a subjectivity that is “indivisibly demolished and remade by the course of time.”¹⁴ There is never “an absolute subjectivity” who can escape becoming “an object for an ulterior *I*.”¹⁵ A living subject is not pure but has “an ambiguous mode of existing.”¹⁶ Thus, Merleau-Ponty observes, “The synthesis of *in itself* and *for itself* which brings Hegelian freedom into being has, however, its truth. In a sense it is the very definition of existence.”¹⁷ This agency then is not a pure autonomy.

Along with being obscured by a “historical density”¹⁸, the subject’s experience of its world and itself is tentative. A full grasp of its experience, be it perceptual or reflective, Merleau-Ponty writes:

is always postponed until a stage when I may fully understand it, yet
this stage can never be reached, since it would be one more moment,

¹³ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 255

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 255

¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 279

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 230

¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 528

¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 277

bounded by the horizon of its future, and requiring in its turn further developments in order to be understood....and since the lived is thus never entirely comprehensible, what I understand never quite tallies with my living experience, in short, I am never quite at one with myself.¹⁹

Lived experience is a repository of meaning that may or may not be accessed and interpreted. There are plural temporalities, present to differing degrees, in communication with each other, but that there is not necessarily a full disclosure between them. We could say that class consciousness is a collective kind of self-consciousness in which individual subjects view their experiences as an intersubjective one. And if self-consciousness itself cannot match up to itself, then we cannot assume that on a collective level that each individual can have total access to the experience of others. Instead, there must be a dialogue between different experiences which will lead to shifting and indeterminate meanings.

Communication then is both an ontology and an epistemology. While significance exists as a part of objects, perception is not an unrestricted access to meaning. Merleau-Ponty works against the notion that the spontaneity of perception arises from a total givenness of the objective world. He outlines that philosophical position as follows:

The objective world being given, it is assumed that it passes on to the sense-organs messages which must be registered, then deciphered in such a way as to reproduce in us the original text. Hence we have in

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 404

principle a point-by-point correspondence and constant connection between the stimulus and the elementary perception.²⁰

Describing perception as an initial registration of the world and then decipherment does not fit with the immediacy of experience. Also, in reproducing an original text, our own text can no longer be said to be an original. A copy by definition will differ, and a point-by-point correspondence does not account for contradiction, surprise, and indeterminacy. However, if we understand perception as communication between subject and object, we can see how information can be lost to be recaptured and then lost again.

Communication also helps us account for why perceived meaning is equivocal. Ambiguity is not a total loss, but rather a hybrid formed through different moments of an exchange between subject and object. Significance still forms with vagueness and absence in place: “the perceived contains gaps which are not mere ‘failures to perceive’....I may be familiar with a face without ever having perceived the colour of the eyes in themselves.”²¹ Here, Merleau-Ponty problematizes the distinction between perception and understanding. Perception is always already a kind of understanding; there “is the constitution, without any ideal model, of a significant grouping.”²² He shows the breakdown of “[t]he distinction between the perceptual life and the concept” so that “understanding also needs to be redefined, since the general connective function ultimately attributed to it by Kantianism is now spread over the whole intentional life and no longer suffices to distinguish it.”²³ This knowledge is not constituted through the imposition of *a priori* categories but is established in a *life-process*. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty does not ghettoize knowledge

²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 8

²¹ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 13

²² Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 61

²³ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 61

within thinking and emphasizes its occurrence in perception and basic modes of experience. Produced through the communication that is consciousness, knowledge cannot be trapped within the interiority of an individual subject because it is dialogically constituted within a social context.

If perception in general can be characterized as communication, so can the experience of social objects and relations. As we will see, central to Merleau-Ponty's account of class consciousness and history is the unfolding of an ambiguous and non-teleological process. Here, the intersubjective dimension of perception becomes explicit. Experiences of oppression or privilege, that is the political are not automatically understood as generalizable, and are quite often seen as individual circumstances. What then goes into the understanding these as societal? Furthermore, can these experiences form the bedrock of political activism?

The question then becomes, how do we recompose the social world? How do we start to change our existence—that is ourselves and our social environment? And since existence is intersubjective, under what conditions do people come together to collectively revolutionize their circumstances? How is it that a common interest is felt, or a subjective experience lived as an intersubjective one, a class consciousness? Why does one actively politicize? In *The Holy Family*, Marx presents another formulation:

The question is not what goal is *envisaged* for the time being by this or that member of the proletariat, or even by the proletariat as a whole. The question is *what is the proletariat* and what course of action will it be forced historically to take in conformity with its own *nature*.²⁴

²⁴ Marx, *The Holy Family* qtd. in Lukács 46

He reframes these issues as a matter of *force* or motivation to act rather than a represented purpose. Class consciousness could then be understood as this very motivation on a perceptual level, a *feeling* of force, rather than an envisaged goal of solidarity and militancy. As we will see, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of class consciousness is also suggestive of an ontology of class, or what 'the proletariat' *is*.

When it comes to the question of how the force of class consciousness arises, Merleau-Ponty contends that neither circumstances nor ideas *determine* it. As in perception in general, the subject of history is not a passive recipient of political meaning, nor is she a self-willed agent. Merleau-Ponty observes, "indeed, it is never the case that my objective position in the production process is sufficient to awaken class consciousness."²⁵ Such an automatic radicalization is clearly contrary to what occurs in the real world.

If people do not revolt by virtue of a certain objective position they occupy in society, neither is it the case that "the decision taken by the worker to will revolution that makes a proletarian out of him."²⁶ If this were so, we are left with the question of *how* revolutionary consciousness is to arise if it is not there in the first place? Do people spontaneously change their minds about the conditions they live under? Consciousness does not arise out of nowhere; it is always rooted by an orientation to significance.

Merleau-Ponty argues that decisions and reflection are not the crucial factors that transform a worker into an agent of revolution. He contends:

Both idealism and objective thinking fail to pin down the coming into being of class consciousness, the former because it deduces actual

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 514

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 514

existence from consciousness, the latter because it derives consciousness from *de facto* existence, and both because they overlook the relationship of motivation.²⁷

The problem with the first position outlined is that the onus for living under oppression (or not) is put fully on an abstracted subject. On the other hand, existence is taken apart from its various significances for the subject. However **the relationship of motivation** brings both subjective and objective existence together.

In this passage, Merleau-Ponty problematically deploys the notion of a *de facto* existence. Elsewhere in the text he defines lived existence as “the permanent act by which man takes up, for his own purposes, and makes his own a certain *de facto* situation.”²⁸ What is the status of this *de facto* situation prior to it being lived by a subject? And on what ground is the subject able to appropriate this situation? The synthesis that is existence he describes, and that I looked at earlier, suggests a mode of being that is neither subject nor object, but a “third genus of being.”²⁹ For Merleau-Ponty, it seems that the social world can be abstracted from its significance, which clashes with his view that in perception we find *essence in existence*. The **relationship of motivation** would seem to rest on the fact that the *de facto* situation is not to begin with neutral.

Counter to this problem of the status of the *de facto*, I will then suggest that the ontology of ‘objective’ conditions needs to be reconceived because phenomenologically they are never just that. Merleau-Ponty himself reveals to us the significance embedded in sensual existence, yet here assumes a blank slate initially. We need to see how objective conditions, like other objects of perception,

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 520

²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 200 f.18

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 408

are dialogically constituted. In this case, Marx provides the terms for such a reconception in his first *Theses on Feuerbach*: “The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism...is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object...but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively.”³⁰

The *subjective* is not interior but always engaged in and open to the world. The subject’s active participation is inherent in the “object’s objectivity and materiality.”³¹

Interestingly, elsewhere Marx figures this “material activity” or “the material intercourse of men” as “the language of real life.”³² It is a dynamic, meaningful exchange, as lived through by people that characterizes society. The subject is not a self-contained entity inserted into a context. She is a part of her environment and vice versa, speaking the *language of real life*.

Again, Marx also comments on the dialogical constitution of the subject in his third *Theses on Feuerbach*:

The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is men that change circumstances and that the educator himself needs educating. Hence, this doctrine necessarily arrives at dividing society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionising practice.³³

³⁰ Marx I. 143

³¹ Butler, *Bodies* 250 n.5

³² Marx and Engels 154

³³ Marx III. 144

For Merleau-Ponty, taking heed of Marx's reminder, people are producers and not just products of circumstances or objects within production. In the transformation of society through a change in human activity—that is *revolutionising practice*—people transform themselves. Society is not acted upon by an element external and superior to it; instead, it is the self-activity of working people that changes the relations of capitalist production and the very basis of our own activity. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that revolution does not materialize “until it is worked out in the dealings men have with each other, and in the relations of the man to his job.”³⁴ **The significance of revolution is enabled through a dialogue conveyed in the *language of real life*.** For Merleau-Ponty, Marx puts aside the dualism of subject and object, and practices phenomenology³⁵, **“by introducing a new mode of historical existence and of meaning: *praxis*.”**³⁶ With this transformative human activity, we have a human agency, which is not an absolute subjectivity, that shapes and reshapes, patterns its own existence in dialogue with this world and other people. **So rather than class consciousness being a particular thought content, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that it “is a praxis; that is to say, it is less than a subject and more than an object; it is a polarized existence, a possibility which appears in the proletarian’s situation at the juncture of things and his life.”**³⁷ It is an intentional link to existence. Merleau-Ponty suggests, “The profound philosophical meaning of the notion of praxis is to place us in an order which is not that of knowledge but rather that of communication, exchange, and association.”³⁸

³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 518

³⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* viii

³⁶ Merleau-Ponty, “Marxism” 47

³⁷ Merleau-Ponty, “Marxism” 47

³⁸ Merleau-Ponty, “Marxism” 50

So if we say that subjects constitute the conditions (or social relations) of the world, the presuppositions of determinism break down:

Nothing determines me from outside, not because nothing acts upon me, but, on the contrary, because I am from the start outside myself and open to the world. We...have with us, by the mere fact of belonging to the world, and not merely being in the world in the way that things are, all that we need to transcend ourselves.³⁹

If there is no absolute outside, we have within our reach the capacity to dialogically transform ourselves and the world.

***Contra* determinism, Merleau-Ponty forwards an existentialist analysis of class consciousness:**

What makes me a proletarian is not the economic system or society considered as systems of impersonal forces, but these institutions as I carry them within me and experience them; nor is it an intellectual operation devoid of motive, but my way of being in the world within this institutional framework.⁴⁰

Alternatively, we could say that political radicalization is being *subject to a force that is personal*. This institutional framework already carries meanings that people live through as a form of perception that are not atomized. The position a person occupies within these structures “are modes of co-existence which are a call upon him.”⁴¹ **People live in communication with a social setting that *offers* them various significances which they are *motivated* in their orientation towards.**

³⁹ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 530

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 515

⁴¹ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 423

As in perception generally, political meaning here is not posited: **“Neither the appointed order, nor the free act which destroys it, is represented; they are lived through in ambiguity.”**⁴² These significances shift, are indeterminate, and

contextual. Therefore we should not commit the mistake, as Merleau-Ponty warns:

of disregarding all but intellectual projects, instead of considering...the polarization of a life towards a goal which is both determinate and indeterminate, which, to the person concerned, is entirely unrepresented, and which is recognized only on being attained.⁴³

Like Marx, he does not stress the thematized goal of class struggle. Strategically, a representation of the goal does not help us gauge where we are actually located in relation to it. Even though class consciousness is directed towards an ambiguous meaning, this sense, as a pole of attraction, draws subjects into a new way of life.

The ramification of Merleau-Ponty’s argument is that there is a practical significance to politics experienced on the perceptual level. Prior and more fundamental to decision and theory, we have a politics that is felt and lived within the social. The consideration and recognition of existential projects also means that we can better understand the *force* running through the intellectual projects of (and on behalf of) oppressed peoples. Indeed, in time, even theorized politics, both on an individual and organizational level, can become an unthematized lived politics or, put another way, a part of a sedimented tradition that returns to perception.

In this way class is “experienced in concrete terms before becoming the object of a deliberate volition. Primarily the social does not exist as a third person object.”⁴⁴

⁴² Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 517

⁴³ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 518

⁴⁴ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 422

This commonality between people is not to begin with experienced as a structure outside and above intersubjective interactions. A thematized comparison of common features also presupposes an initial separation or solipsism. Workers “co-exist in the same situation and feel alike, not in virtue of some comparison, as if each one of us lived primarily within himself, but on the basis of our tasks and gestures.”⁴⁵ **This feeling alike is an indeterminate and ambiguous perception.** Therefore, a similar existence need not be perceived as exactly the same, but rather that intersubjective experiences intersect (and separate) in time. **Furthermore, if communication is never final, people’s dialogue with their ‘same situation’ through work and with others will be on-going.**

Merleau-Ponty hints at the temporality of class consciousness. He uses the example of it arising when a day-labourer, **“has perceived, in a concrete way, that his life is synchronized with the life of the town labourers and that all share a common lot.”**⁴⁶ **The meaning for me of someone else’s life materializes because their life and mine share the same rhythm (or converge through a counterpoint of distinct rhythms). We are synchronizing with other people who can actively engage or disengage with us. There are multiple experiences of class, which are not immediate, harmonious, or complete.**

The introduction of time into the matter, however, is a productive point to start mapping its various complexities. Indeed class undergoes a process of composition; that is, it is temporal. It is not the case that class *is*, but rather that it *becomes* in this passage from *Phenomenology of Perception*:

Social space begins to acquire a magnetic field, and a region of the exploited is seen to appear. At every pressure felt from any quarter of

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 516

⁴⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology* 516

the social horizon, the process of regrouping becomes clearly discernible beyond ideologies and various occupations. Class is coming into being...⁴⁷

If lived meaning is ambiguous, could we not say that these motivations or ‘magnetic fields’ are multiple or will permute depending on our focus? Is it not the case that we have various ‘regions of the exploited’—regions which will shift and converge? What we understand as ‘objective’ conditions (the relations of production) can include aspects outside the workplace (community and family life, the horizon of capitalist production) to include unpaid as well as paid work. Focusing on the lived also brings in various components of capital in which the racialized and gendered aspects of class can be better understood. Also, Merleau-Ponty here is describing the process by which the subdivisions of economic class synthesize into a collective, but what is the status of the apperceived in this class politics? The formation of class identity is a contradictory and contested, or an ambiguous, process. To assert an objective class prior to its lived experience also runs the risk of reifying it.

As Merleau-Ponty asserts, “we do not imagine, through any backward-looking illusion, any essential necessity, we point out an existential connection.”⁴⁸ **Class does not have a trans-historic character, but is lived through, and by living it, classed subjects recompose it. If it is not static, then this category could then intersect with other categories, like ‘race’ and gender. Class then does not have to “refer to a pre-given or already constituted *identity*, a pure referent or essential set of facts that preexist the identity-signifier or act as the measure of its adequacy.”⁴⁹** As with identity categories in general, it “is a complexity whose totality is permanently

⁴⁷ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 517

⁴⁸ Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology 197

⁴⁹ Butler, Bodies 210

deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time.”⁵⁰ Herein lies “the open and democratizing potential of the category.”⁵¹ **Class as social subjectivity can be understood as constituted by praxis and communication.**

In conclusion, communication establishes new ways of being and new meanings that do not exist prior to the exchange. This relational and transformative character of consciousness also establishes it as a horizon of politics. Rather than understanding the basis of consciousness as apolitical, we could say that it is pre-political, not as prior to politics but as a co-present condition. It is this communicative structure amongst subjects and between their objective conditions that enables and shapes the political. Rather than being the victims of circumstance, people both make and are made by political change in a dialogical, open-ended process. Merleau-Ponty stages a productive encounter between political thought and existentialism: he does not just bring phenomenology and Marxism together, but convinces us that Marx himself was a phenomenologist all along.

⁵⁰ Butler, Gender 22

⁵¹ Butler, Bodies 221

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