

Response to Kheya Bag's Paper, "The Language of Real Life: Communication in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Politics"

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Existential and Phenomenological Theory and Culture Society, Congress 2006

May 27, 2006

As Kheya Bag articulately lays out in her finely crafted paper on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of politics, "The Language of Real Life: Communication in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Politics," for Merleau-Ponty, politics was a sensual *practice*, perceptually experienced, ambiguously lived, and intersubjectively worked out. Throughout her paper, Kheya points to the centrality of communication in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ways of looking at radicalized life. This lived, dialogical, spontaneous, and embodied politics is, as Kheya quotes Marx and Engles, a "material activity" grounded in the "language of real life" (p. 11). The source for Merleau-Ponty's political becoming, and the grounding for his political philosophy, was the French Resistance during WWII, as was the case with many French intellectuals who lived through this period. As Martin Jay writes, what he learned from this period of his life was that "men were immersed in the ambiguities of history" and that there was "no pure freedom above the fray."¹

As Kheya implicitly alludes to in her paper, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of politics and his descriptions of the emergence of class consciousness is in tune with his greater project of articulating – or, better said, describing phenomenologically – what bodily life is. The interplay of the body's perceptual, affective, motor-practical, and

¹ Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984) 365.

cognitive capacities and the political coursed throughout most of his prolific but short-lived career as France's preeminent philosopher of lived experience.

In my response to Kheya's paper, I want to first give a very brief synopsis of it. I think such a task is worthwhile given Merleau-Ponty's careful phenomenological unfolding of how class consciousness "comes into being" through bodily perception, intersubjectivity, dialogue, and co-interpretation.² I think that rearticulating Kheya's paper in different words is especially useful today given how unusual Merleau-Ponty's language of lived experience might sound to our poststructuralist or objectivist ears.

I'd then like to pose three major questions inspired by Kheya's paper. In my choice to rearticulate Kheya's paper and then pose questions, I'd like to engage today in what I feel is a constructive – and, indeed, a collectively creative – practice of questioning and co-interpreting Merleau-Ponty's political phenomenology with the hopes of extending each other's understanding. Most importantly, my questions are intended to, as Kheya writes about, engage in an intellectual praxis right here in this room as we dialogue together. I believe Merleau-Ponty would endorse this practice.³

Outline of Paper

In her paper's exposition of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of politics, Kheya relies mostly on a close and concise reading of key sections of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. She also appeals to Marx at his most phenomenological, primarily the young Marx's "Theses on Feurbach," but some references also to *The German Ideology* and *The Holy Family*, as well as referencing in key places Merleau-Ponty's posthumously published essay, "The Primacy of Perception," Judith Butler, and Georg Lukacs. Kheya

² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962) 445.

³ In the spirit of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of intersubjectivity, and quoting words he wrote in the third to last chapter of his book *Phenomenology of Perception* on the *cogito*, today, let's allow our "gestures to invade [our] world and guide [our mutual] gaze" as individuals who have "a living experience of the same world" (albeit, and ambiguously defined experience) (Merleau Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 405).

astutely blends these sources in order to elucidate the phenomenological dynamics that Merleau-Ponty believed to be at play between political life and the sensuousness of bodily life. Kheya asserts that Merleau-Ponty bequeaths to us his most insightful views on political life and class consciousness in his writings on perception, rather than in his less-phenomenological writings on state communism and Hegelian Marxism. I think this is a unique and compelling take on the political and phenomenological writings of Merleau-Ponty, given how central perception was to his phenomenology of the practices that lead to radicalization.

Kheya begins her paper by walking us through how the **body as subject**, the **communicative essence of consciousness**, and the **openness of this subject-body** inhering into the world and having the world inhere into it, begins to map out “the implications of understanding political consciousness as first and foremost a perceptual consciousness” (p. 1). As such, the body, Kheya states, in tune with Merleau-Ponty, interplays with its worldly atmosphere as and **incarnated existence**, whether the experiences of this fleshly existence are within the personal or social realms of life. The body reverberates with things and our lived situations – it is abuzz with them – and this attunement with things and situations forms a provisional sketch of our Being. The body-subject synaesthetically communicates with the things of the world while intersubjectively engaging with and co-creating a social world with other body-subjects. As such, we come to quickly realize in reading Merleau-Ponty that cognition and intellectualism is decentred, although not effaced, as a privileged site of knowledge and truth.⁴

⁴ As Merleau-Ponty works out in *Phenomenology of Perception*, a four-folded modality of bodily life synaesthetically interplays with what is lived via the body-subject’s motor-practical, perceptual-sensual, affectual-social, and cognitive-linguistic capacities.

Lived life, Kheya reminds us, **blurs the boundaries** between inside and outside, subject and object, historical totality and the concrete present, and pure agency and socio-historical contingency. In close parallel with Merleau-Ponty's language, Kheya evocatively writes that our bodies are already-always involved in **action and movement** as we gear ourselves into the world. Indeed, Kheya reminds us that, for Merleau-Ponty, "the world is my body's point of support" (p. 3). I think this section of her paper is a very lucid synthesis of Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on how the body is already-always engrained into the world, the main theme that runs through Part 1 of *Phenomenology of Perception*, which focuses specifically on the body.

She goes on to point out that, for Merleau-Ponty, the **meaning of things is made manifest, not determined, in consciousness**. In other words, we are deeply implicated in the meaning of the world, but do not predetermine this meaning. Subject and object are "formed in and through dialogue" (p. 4), writes Kheya. Meaning and significance is, for the embodied subject, already-always **ambiguous** and in constant formation. As such, the meanings of things are **fragmentary and provisional**. Objects thus always infuse themselves into the embodied subject, and, at the same time, objects extend us outwards to meet them.

Further, **temporality, Kheya reminds us**, is crucial for how the body-subject comes to know the world and herself. Communication is dynamic and the unity of the subject "constituted through its intentionality" with the object is not a congealed unity but, as Kheya writes quoting Merleau-Ponty, a "presumptive unity on the horizon of experience" (Merleau-Ponty, quoted on p. 5). That is, we are entrenched in the thickness of the world, obscured by a "historical density" (Merleau-Ponty, quoted on, p. 6), and never able to fully grasp our experience of it, perceptually or cognitively. As such, perceptual life is ambiguous and outcomes to actions are never certain.

After Kheya lays out for us how the body, i.e., the subject, communicates with the world and both comes to know itself and its relation to things ambiguously and dialogically, she rearticulates how, for Merleau-Ponty, **the political** – or, as Kheya puts it, “expressions of oppression or privilege,” is most often not generalizable to us but circumstantially felt (p. 8). Rather than being predetermined by the “objective conditions” (p. 11) of existence, the political is spontaneously experienced as we live through it and perhaps struggle with the structures that frame our concrete life. That is, for Merleau-Ponty, there is not only sensuousness to our everyday living, but also to politicized life. In addition, as our perception is fundamentally communicational, so is our experience of the social.

Rather than economically determined, **we are motivated to engage in “revolutionizing practices” as we transform ourselves and each other** via, as Kheya puts it, the very “self-activity of working people” (p. 12). Our capacity to gear into the world in a synaesthetic disposition makes us “producers and not just products of circumstances,” Kheya writes (p. 12). Making an astute link with a phenomenological sounding Marx, Kheya points to, if I may qualify it anachronistically, a Merleau-Pontian-like passage in Marx’s first “Thesis on Feurbach” where he states that for “materialism... things, reality, sensuousness” should be, first and foremost, conceived of as “human sensuous activity, practice,” rather than conceived of only as “the form of the object” (Marx, quoted on p. 11). Thus, **revolutionary activity is worked out in lived life, existentially**. Rather than the privileged domain of the party platform or presaged millenarian theories of the future, social revolution is an emergent and creative process worked out through the very activities of oppressed peoples and in their everyday conjunctures. As such, social change is enabled through a dialogic form of praxis.

Transformative human activity is always praxical, Merleau-Ponty believed. Praxically, we have the “ability to consciously transform our environment”⁵ via our communicative capacities (pp. 12-13). That is, we are not only imposed on by the world, others, and institutional contingencies, but we can change, recreate, and rebuild our world based on our own activity in it. Further, the proletariat comes to know itself not through a vanguardist-led pedagogy, predetermined ideas of class, or even, to quote Kheya, “envisaged goals of solidarity and militancy” (p. 9), but, rather, via **“a force or motivation,” a “feeling of force”** (p. 9) within a collective’s lived experiences. Thus, **class**, for Merleau-Ponty, is **“lived through” and is not “trans-historic”** (p. 16), as Kheya continues to point out, and certainly not the universalized concept that serves as the fulfillment of history in some future utopia. That is, for Merleau-Ponty, class is an open concept, is already-always an intersubjective and embodied *becoming*. We can say that for Merleau-Ponty, class consciousness is a provisional sketch of the Being of a collective politics. It emerges out of the oppressions or exploitations that are understood intersubjectively from the lived conditions in the “atmosphere of my[, or *our*,] present,” as Merleau-Ponty writes.⁶ In his famous last chapter on “Freedom” in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty further described the becoming of class-consciousness as emerging out of the “pressure felt from any quarter of the social horizon...beyond ideologies and various occupations.”⁷

Question 1 – Descriptive Philosophy and Political Activism

I’d like to start off my series of questions by rephrasing, as a question, what I believe to be Kheya’s main thematic thread that runs through her paper. These questions are also at the heart of my own engagement with phenomenology for my own research and activism which continues to be, for me, a work in progress:

⁵ Andrew Edgar & Peter Sedgwick, *Cultural Theory: Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2004) 309.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 442.

⁷ *Ibid*, 445.

- ❖ If *political action* comes out of an existential, experiential, perceptual, yet ambiguous and emergent understandings of our circumstances, and if class composes itself by people “sharing the same lot” and “synchronizing with other people who can actively engage or disengage with us” (p. 15), how does a descriptive philosophy interplay with political activism? That is, what is the role of an “existentialist analysis” (p. 13) for “recompos[ing] the social world”?

Question 2 – Phenomenological Practice and Institutionalized Life

In one moment in Kheya’s paper she quotes Merleau-Ponty where he states that “[w]hat makes me a proletarian is not the economic system...or impersonal forces, but these institutions as I carry them with me and experience them” (Merleau-Ponty, quoted on p. 13).

- ❖ If this is the case, how do we form a class consciousness emergently and spontaneously, as Merleau-Ponty proposes, if we are materially and intellectually constrained by these institutions?
- ❖ Marcuse writes that our “inner freedom” and our thoughts have been “invaded and whittled down” by the institutional forces that instrumentalize our motivations, actions, and thoughts.⁸ These words, and the words from Merleau-Ponty I just quoted, also remind me of Foucault’s notions of *biopower*, and *governmentality* – that is, the ways institutional forces take claim over our language, bodies, thoughts, motivations, actions, and life itself as sites of capitalist means and ends. (For Foucault, the *body* influenced by biopower has become the site of a diffuse but effective institutionalized control of life itself through the “disciplining” and transformation of our bodies into usefully docile “machine[s]” used by capital through the “regulatory controls” of our “biological

⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) 5.

processes,” health, life expectancy, the control of propagation, etc.⁹ The *subject* influenced by governmentality influences the “projects, plans, and practices” that, as Rabinow and Rose write, “conduct the conduct of subjects.”¹⁰) So, if the language we speak, the thoughts we think, and the ways we behave are institutionally pervaded, as Merleau-Ponty, Marcuse, and Foucault suggest – and in our contemporary context, mostly shaped by the institutions that undergird capitalism – can a descriptive philosophy of lived experience as proposed by Merleau-Ponty help us to break free from the **institutional frameworks** that saturate our daily lives and our ways of communicating with each other? Is such a radical philosophy leading to a revolutionary class-consciousness even possible if language – our very means of communication – and thought are so institutionalized?

Question 3 – The Motivating Force

At one point in her paper, Kheya writes that political action and emergent class is grounded in the “magnetic fields” (p. 16) or motivating “forces” (p. 9) that give us the “most spontaneous experience of politics” (p. 1).

- ❖ Perhaps we can discuss more what these *motivating forces* are and how political activism can or does form within them and, indeed, perhaps because of them.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction: Volume 1* (New York: Vintage, 1990) 139.

¹⁰ Paul Rabinow & Nikolas Rose (Eds.), *The Essential Foucault: Selections from Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984* (New York: The New Press, 2003) x.