

“Merleau-Ponty’s Intertwined Notions of Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity”
Douglas Low

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I.

Thirty years after Merleau-Ponty's death, his work remains of vital importance to us today. For he develops one of the most truly dialectical and enlightening ways of conceiving the individual and intersubjectivity. For Merleau-Ponty the individual and the intersubjective are mutually defining, with the subject influencing the other and social relations at the same time that they impact on him or her. One of the important consequences of such a dialectical position is that it provides an alternative to both the overly subjective and narrowly objective methodologies found prevalent today in philosophy, psychology and the social sciences. Merleau-Ponty's work is able to integrate the supposed subjectivism of phenomenology with the objectivism of structuralism, two methodologies that are often thought of as radically distinct and irreconcilable. Some have argued that the mature Merleau-Ponty actually abandons the subjectivity of phenomenology for the structuralist approach¹, the implication being, of course, that phenomenology and subjectivity should be abandoned by everyone, that a more objective mode of analysis would produce superior and more accurate results. I intend to show that Merleau-Ponty does not abandon one side of the dialectic (the subjective) for the other (the objective) but that he integrates them. Merleau-Ponty's method dialectically combines phenomenology and structuralism.

Marjorie Grene's statement that Merleau-Ponty is one of the first philosophers to speak to us in non-Cartesian language must therefore be taken seriously. Since Descartes' work first appeared in the 17th century his dualism has plagued Western thought and practice. Too often one observes, in all disciplines and areas of life, positions being formed on the basis of Descartes' firmly entrenched mind/body dualism. The individual is often seen as either a free conscious subject or, contrarily, as a necessary product of an external environment. Merleau-Ponty is one of the first to overcome this either/or approach, and he does so in a way that has important consequences for social/political thought in general and Marxist thought in particular. The tendency within orthodox Marxism has been to remove

the individual subject from analysis. The individual is even seen as a mere "grammatical fiction"². And, on the contrary, Western thought and ideology are filled with references to the importance and sovereignty of the individual. It is therefore not difficult to see that one's theory of the subjective and intersubjective overlaps with political theory and practice. The fact that the individual is seen simply as a product of social relations reveals a political tendency within the Soviet Union to disregard individual rights and liberties. The individual, in this view, is to serve a function within the state for the good of the whole. On the other hand, as many Western commentators have noted, the overemphasis on the individual reveals, in many cases, the disintegration and fragmentation of social life.³ I will attempt to show that Merleau-Ponty's balanced dialectical theory of the individual and intersubjectivity allows him to develop a political theory which recognizes the individual as an individual yet also as a social being. It is his approach, then, that can best inform a healthy and balanced political practice.

In this paper I will attempt to accomplish three things. First, I will attempt to reveal Merleau-Ponty's balanced theory of subjectivity and intersubjectivity as it is found scattered throughout his published works, including the posthumous *The Visible and the Invisible*.⁴ The display of Merleau-Ponty's thought in this difficult and creative posthumous document will require some development and free interpretation, interpretations however that rest firmly on Merleau-Ponty's insights as their starting point. These insights enabled Merleau-Ponty to provide a path between idealism and materialism, between rationalism and empiricism, and between subjectivism and objectivism. Therefore, as my second goal, I shall attempt to show, by means of a careful analysis of Merleau-Ponty's theory of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, that he does not abandon phenomenology for structuralism but dialectically connects them. This dialectical approach carries with it some vitally important political consequences. On the one hand, Merleau-Ponty's refusal to completely abandon the conscious subject stands as a defense against dehumanizing political and methodological views that reduce the person to an object or a passive collection of objective relations. And on the other hand, his integration of the subject into the community stands as a defense against the fragmentation of the social life in the West because of the overemphasis placed on the individual. Consequently, as my third goal, I shall attempt to reveal, also by means of the analysis of Merleau-Ponty's theory of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, his dialectical

understanding of political relations. It is Merleau-Ponty's balanced view of respect for the individual and responsibility to the community that provides the best guidelines for social theory and practice.

I will begin the study of Merleau-Ponty's thesis on subjectivity and intersubjectivity with a brief consideration of Jean-Paul Sartre's work. I do this for two reasons. 1.) Sartre's early position strikes such a resonant cord in so many Americans and West Europeans that it is difficult to think of it as anything other than representative of the individualism found present within these cultures. Sartre's work, as it champions the individual and individual freedom, conforms perfectly to the adoration of individualism in the Western world. Thus, by contrasting Merleau-Ponty's position to that of the early Sartre, I will also be highlighting the difference between Merleau-Ponty's thesis and the extreme individualism found present in the West. 2.) A fine recent article by Ronald Aronson⁵ claimed that Sartre's late work, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*,⁶ picks up in its political analysis where Merleau-Ponty leaves off, that Merleau-Ponty abandons Marxism just as Sartre is undertaking his monumental study of it.⁷ Aronson subsequently argues that Merleau-Ponty's Marxist refusal should be abandoned for Sartre's *Critique*.⁸ As an additional goal of this paper, I hope to show that this would not be a wise move, that it is Merleau-Ponty's dialectical understanding of subjectivity and intersubjectivity that provides a much firmer foundation for political/social theory in general and for Marxism in particular. Let me now briefly consider Sartre's treatment of subjectivity and intersubjectivity,⁹ and then I will move on to consider Merleau-Ponty's account and a comparison between these two thinkers.

In a marvelous and now famous passage Sartre illustrates that the recognition of the other is spontaneous and immediate, not a reflective, intellectual construction.¹⁰ Imagine, with Sartre, that a person is obsessively peering through the keyhole of an apartment door, straining to see if his or her lover is in the apartment with another person. Suddenly, someone steps into the corridor at the other end of the hall. The embarrassment of being labeled a voyeur is immediate, as is the recognition of the source of this embarrassment, the other person. Two things happen to the subject as a result of this experience. 1.) The subject is drained, so to speak, of his or her subjectivity. The person looking through the keyhole is pulled from his or her self-absorbed and obsessive private world and is labeled from the outside. 2.) This labeling brings with it the positive possibility of firmly defining oneself, of providing a firm foundation

for one's life instead of spontaneously flowing toward an indefinite future. But, according to Sartre, providing oneself with a firm foundation is doomed to failure, for the individual cannot be fixed by an outside point of view. The individual is a subjective freedom aiming at a future. Nothing can alter this. Yet, the individual is still unable to avoid the look or gaze of the other. Thus, an unresolvable struggle ensues, the struggle to define oneself through one's own action and free choice in the face of the other's imposing view. This unresolvable struggle is what leads Sartre to say, in No Exit, that "Hell is other people".¹¹

Clearly, then, for the early Sartre there is no mediation between the self and other. There is no chance for an exchange or reciprocity, with each subject giving and receiving. No freedom can submit to another. This leads Sartre to abandon the idea that human beings can form groups or social units with genuinely shared goals or projects. As Sartre says, there is no "we" for a group of self-interested, totally free subjects. The only concept of the group that Sartre will admit is the one formed by the "look" of some third party. Just as the look of the other gives the individual an outside, so the look of some third party objectifies the individual's relation to others. Thus the concept of "we" has some meaning if it is formed on the basis of the perceptions of an outside observer. I am a member of a team or a political party because I am perceived by other teams or parties. Nevertheless, the goals that I experience within the party are really only my own; they do not genuinely overlap with the goals of others. For Sartre there is no "we" as a subject. There is no basis for the concept of the group based on a genuine sharing of goals.

Even though the mature Sartre must be applauded for his attempt to link the individual with the group (and thus go beyond his early work in which there is no "we" as a subject), he does not significantly escape the Cartesianism and individualism of his earlier position. In fact, in his analysis of the fused group in the *Critique*, Sartre repeats the general structure of his *Being and Nothingness* argument just cited above. The individuals, in this case living in the section of Paris near the Bastille, live as individuals with little or no regard for other subjects and their projects. Yet this group is unified by the presence of an external threat represented by the Bastille and the hostile government forces that it contains. The relationship of each individual to others is conceptualized by each individual because of

his or her relationship to a third party, in this case the government forces.¹² The difference between Sartre's later position and his earlier one is that the group in the mature work is experienced as a "we", not just as an object but also as a subject. There is here a genuine sharing and overlapping of goals and projects. I would argue however that these individual projects are still quite self-contained. Sartre's point of departure is still the self-contained projects of relatively isolated individuals.¹³ It is only later, because of an external threat, that the individuals attempt to link their subjective goals with those around them. I hope to show that Merleau-Ponty provides a more adequate analysis of the individual in social relations, one that does not begin with the isolated individual that then proceeds to social relations. For Merleau-Ponty, the individual is immediately with others and immediately shares a social life with them. I will therefore argue that it is Merleau-Ponty who provides a much firmer theoretical foundation for social theory and political practice. It is Merleau-Ponty's theoretical understanding that overcomes the excessive individualism that is found in Sartre's position and in the West and that provides a basis for a shared social life and for social cohesion. In addition, Merleau-Ponty is one of the few thinkers that have been able to do this without ignoring the rights and importance of the individual.

II.

Merleau-Ponty's full-length treatment of subjectivity and intersubjectivity can be found in two places, *Phenomenology of Perception*¹⁴ and "The Child's Relation with Others", which appears in *Primacy of Perception*.¹⁵ In attempting to reveal Merleau-Ponty's innovative thesis I will focus on the latter. I do so because it is Merleau-Ponty's most extensive treatment of this topic and comes later in his intellectual development. I will refer to the former only briefly. I will also undertake a brief analysis of the notes contained in *The Visible and the Invisible*, for these represent Merleau-Ponty's "final position", his attempt to rework the philosophical foundations of his own thought and, as I will suggest, of Marxism. "The Child's Relation with Others" will prove to be quite helpful in the effort to grasp this final position.

In "The Child's Relation with Others" Merleau-Ponty considers classical psychology's approach to the problem of the recognition of others. He begins by investigating some of its concepts and presuppositions, viz., the concept of the psyche and the body. By psyche the classical psychologist

means, following Descartes, that which is given to the individual through introspection. The psyche is taken to be the private awareness one has of one's own feelings, ideas, or imaginings--the private awareness that one has of the contents of one's own consciousness. No one else can directly experience my ideas or imaginings. No one else can, for example, experience *my* experience of anger or even my perception of greenness. Of course, within the framework of these presuppositions, it must be recognized that the grasping of the other's psyche can only occur in an indirect fashion, since each individual has a privileged access only to his or her own psyche. (PrP, p. 113)

Merleau-Ponty next considers the concept of the body that is used by the classical psychologists. This term can best be revealed by considering the concept of cenesthesia, "meaning a mass of sensation that would express to the subject the state of his different organs and different bodily functions". According to this view my body is given to me as a mass of introceptive sensations, as an agglomeration of cenesthetic and kinesthetic feelings. Of course, this makes my experience of my own body completely private as well as shutting me off from the experience another has of his or her own body. (PrP, p. 114) Given these presuppositions the only way that I can recognize the other person as a person, as a conscious subject, is to project my own internally experienced psyche into a body that I recognize, from a point of view outside of it, as similar to my own. (PrP, p. 115)

Merleau-Ponty believes that there are some serious difficulties with this approach and "the argument from analogy" that it implies--the argument which states that I recognize the other by first noting that his or her body, perceived from the outside, is similar to my own and then by projecting my subjective interior into this similar looking vehicle. First of all, Merleau-Ponty argues that this argument actually presupposes what it is trying to explain. The recognition of the other's body as similar to my own already grasps a *human* body, a body invested with a psyche (PP, p.352). Merleau-Ponty further argues that the child's recognition of the other, and children clearly do recognize the other, cannot possibly be explained by this complicated reflective and intellectual process of recognition. The infant's recognition of its mother's smile, allegedly perceived as an object, cannot possibly be associated with an intellectual judgment about its own motor smile felt from the inside. The infant simply has not yet developed such reflective and intellectual abilities. (PrP, p. 115)

Merleau-Ponty contends that since this attempted explanation fails, an attempt must be made to remove its prejudices and preconceptions. He begins with the concept of the psyche and instead of thinking of it as something that is introspectively given only to itself, he defines (or describes) consciousness as a relationship to the world, as active and turned primarily toward the world. With this notion of the psyche it becomes much easier to recognize the other as another human being, for I am not attempting to grasp a private psyche absolutely different from my own but simply transferring action for one body to another. The other is grasped "as a certain way of comporting himself toward the world". (PrP, pp. 116-117)

This brings Merleau-Ponty to the concept of the body, the second concept of classical psychology that he wants to transform. Instead of knowing the body primarily through cenesthetic and kinesthetic sensations, instead of knowing the body as a mass of introceptively given sensation, Merleau-Ponty argues that the human body is best revealed as a "postural" or "corporeal schema". The conscious that I have of my body is really "the perception of my body's position in relation to the vertical, the horizontal, and certain other axis of important coordinates of its environment". (PrP, p. 117) The consciousness I have of my body is as a certain hold on the world, a certain structural orientation toward the world. My body is my access to the world, my means of harmoniously dealing with and making my way in the world. Thus, when I perceive the other's body, I perceive a conduct, an orientation toward the world, and there is often an "intentional coupling" of our bodies. Merleau-Ponty says that the other's intentional conduct plays across my own body, that "it is this transfer of my intentions to the other's body and of his intentions to my own...that make possible the perception of others". (PrP, p. 118)

There is another topic that will help clarify Merleau-Ponty's account of the individual's relationship to the other, and this is the consideration of the genesis and development of human consciousness within the individual. Merleau-Ponty here follows, with some modification, the psychoanalytic theory of individuation, which states that the child is not born into the world with a sense of its own individuality but with no sense of distinctness between itself and others. Merleau-Ponty says that this early stage of development is characterized by an "anonymous collectivity, an undifferentiated group life". (PrP, P. 119) The development of the sense of individuality is a gradual process which

begins around age two, continues throughout life, and is never entirely complete.

Now, if the original state of the child's experience is that of a sense of unity with or indistinctness from the other, then it is much easier to see how the behavior of another is perceived as an extension of the child's own behavior. If consciousness and the body are a relation to the world, and if, for the child, there is little or no distinction between its own behavior and that of others, then it is relatively easy to see why behavior can be translated from one person to another. Furthermore, while it is true that distinctness and individuality do develop as the child matures, elements of this undifferentiated group life do remain in adult life. Merleau-Ponty is here making the Heideggerian point that in the experience of everyday adult life the individual does not perceive the others as separate reified things over against which the individual stands. Rather, the individual experiences others (the group or intersubjectivity) as that of which the individual is a part. In the lived relationship to the world and others, the individual perceives him or herself to be a part of a human world, a part of a cultural world whose objects are shared and open to the activity of all.¹⁶

Thus far we can see that Merleau-Ponty's account of the individual and the relation to the other (intersubjectivity) are quite different from both Sartre's and the classical psychologist's approach. Both Sartre and the classical psychologist maintain (consciously or unconsciously) a Cartesian approach to the understanding of the individual and his/her relationship to others. Both begin with the isolated individual's own awareness of his/her own private, introspectively given experience. This distinctly private experience is then linked, through a complicated series of maneuvers, to the experience of others. This link is primarily an external one, that is, one that does not involve a genuine "meeting of minds". It is true that Sartre does not accept the classical "argument from analogy", that his recognition of the other is immediate and spontaneous rather than reflective and derivative. However, a close analysis of Sartre's early and mature position revealed, nevertheless, the individualism still prevalent in his approach. Merleau-Ponty's dialectical position is decidedly different and far superior. According to him, the individual should not be conceived as an isolated consciousness closed in on itself. The individual does not begin his or her life as an isolated ego with little or no chance of sharing experience with others. Rather, for Merleau-Ponty the individual begins his or her life as a social being. The individual's

conscious life overlaps with that of others. Thus, if there is to be any hope at all of developing a political and social theory in which all human beings truly recognize each other as human, it can be seen that Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the individual and intersubjectivity provides a much more plausible foundation for such a theory. Before I investigate these political foundations any further, and now that "The Child's Relation with Others" has provided a provisional understanding of Merleau-Ponty's analysis, let me briefly consider what Merleau-Ponty had to say about individuality and intersubjectivity in the unfinished *The Visible and the Invisible*.

III.

Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible* challenges even more thoroughly the Cartesian tradition (including Merleau-Ponty's own Cartesian phase) and Descartes' notion of an isolated ego or subject. Consider the following statement.¹⁷

"Since the visible [for example a gestalt figure]...is always...between the aspects we see of it, there is access to it only through an experience which, like it, is wholly outside of itself. It is thus, and not as the bearer of a knowing subject, that our body commands the visible for us..." (VI, p. 136)

Merleau-Ponty is here attempting to recast the notion of consciousness. It is conceived not as the knowing, reflective subject of Descartes and Husserl but as carnal, as a prepersonal bodily relation to the world. The body is seen as a lived through relation to the world.

A closer look at Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body will help in the effort to form a clear understanding of his final notion of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, of how the body is the bearer of the subject and how it (the body) opens to an intersubjective world. Analyzing the relationship between incarnate consciousness and the world, Merleau-Ponty first considers tactile experience, for here the relationship between the perceiver and the perceived is closer. Merleau-Ponty claims that in order to have a tactile experience my hand must feel from the inside, as it moves across a surface, but, in order for this to take place, the hand must be capable of being touched from the outside. There is a reversibility or chiasm that is present here that must be grasped in order to understand this simple yet fundamental experience of tactile sensation. In order for the hand to be able to feel from the inside it must "pass over

into the ranks of the touched". (VI, pp. 133-135) And "it is no different for vision... " (VI, p. 133) for "...he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he is of it..." (VI, p. 134)

For Merleau-Ponty, then, experience does not occur just anywhere. The tactile, for example, occurs within me, within my body, for I feel my hand from the inside. Yet a contribution is made to the tactile from the outside, and these experiences blend. There is consequently an uncertainty about where the toucher ends and being touched begins. There is a blend of the feeler, toucher, touching with that which is felt, touched, being touched. The tactile (an experience) brings together the feeler (the experiencer) with the felt (the object) in such a way that a distinction cannot quite be made between them. The tactile experience has an inside but also a general side, for the tactile extends beyond the toucher and includes him or her. There is thus an anonymous, prepersonal character to bodily experience. There is the tactile in general or the visible in general of which the perceiver is a part. (VI, pp. 139-140) For Merleau-Ponty it is the body that is both subjective and objective; it is a *lived* combination of both; and he is here describing the interworld of lived experience in which there is a blend of the subjective and objective. The subjective and objective are both present but blended in such a way that they cannot be separated or completely distinguished. The explicit subjective and objective come out of this original whole. Just as the child's conscious life does not begin with an explicit sense of autonomy, so the lived bodily awareness is not yet individual, experience is not yet subjective, for it extends beyond and includes the subject. Merleau-Ponty is here making the same point that he made in "The Child's Relation with Others" but at a more profound level.

Merleau-Ponty goes on to argue that the difficulties of establishing the unity of experience, and thus of producing an explicit sense of individuality, are overcome if it is realized that the different perspectives of one's own experience blend together because they occur in one sole body. (VI, pp. 141-142) I begin to form an explicit sense of my own individuality because experience does not occur just anywhere; it occurs within one place, within one body; experiences blend because they are unified by one body.

Recall, however, that this bodily experience is prepersonal and thus not yet completely individual. Merleau-Ponty wants to be careful of invoking the Cartesian claim that my own experience is only my

own, that my experience cannot be shared by others. He responds to the objection that "the experiences that are given to others are a mystery to me".

"This is not completely true; for me not to have an idea, nor an image, nor a representation, but as it were the imminent experience of them, it suffices that I look at a landscape, that I speak of it to someone. Then through the concordant operation of his body and my own what I see passes into him. This individual green of the meadow under my eyes invades his vision without quitting my own. I recognize in my green his green... There is no problem of the *alter ego* because it is not *I* who sees, not *he* who sees, because an anonymous visibility inhabits both of us, a vision in general..." (VI, p. 142)

Thus, even though the incarnate consciousness is individual (occurs within one body), it is also open to the other's experience. The relationship between the self and other is mediated by the world, by an anonymous visibility. Because of the structures of the body there is a prepersonal, anonymous generality to experience, an experience of which both I and the other can take part. As Merleau-Ponty says in *Phenomenology of Perception* the individual is surrounded by a halo of generality. But let me proceed with his analysis of the formation of individuality.

"At the frontier of the mute or solipsist world where, in the presence of other seers, my visible is confirmed as an exemplar of a universal visibility, we reach a second or figurative meaning or vision, which will be the *intuitus mentis* or idea, a sublimation of the flesh, which will be mind or thought." (VI, p. 145)

It can be seen from this statement that the presence of other seers, along with the unity of experience within the body, contributes to the formation of my sense of self as an individual. However, Merleau-Ponty here goes on to make a vitally important point about this relationship to the other.

"But the factual presence of the bodies could not produce thought or the idea if the seeds were not in my own body. Thought is a relationship with oneself and the world as well as a relationship with the other; hence it is established in the three dimensions at the same time." (VI, p. 145)

According to Merleau-Ponty, then, my lived prereflective, prepersonal contact with the world is articulated (and made a particular example of universal visibility) through a reflection on the prereflective (a reflection that is motivated by the presence of the other). The seeds of this articulation, however, are present prior to the presence of the other, for how could the mere presence of the other bring about my own self-awareness and my awareness of the world? How could the mere presence of the other create my own consciousness if it was not in some way prefigured in my own body? The presence of the other helps complete our reflection on ourselves and the world. It does not virtually create it. The experience of the other, of the world, and of myself are all prefigured in the body, in one sole body.

How are i.), self-consciousness and individuality (a relation with oneself), ii.), consciousness (a relation with the world), and iii.), the recognition of the other prefigured in experience? Or the question might be restated by asking how the body is the bearer of self-consciousness, consciousness, and the relationship to others? By following the answer to this question it will be easier to grasp how Merleau-Ponty understands the formation of the sense of individuality and how it is related to others. Self-consciousness, consciousness, and the relationship to the other are prefigured in the body because the body is a two-dimensional being, a whole with two sides or aspects, an obverse and reverse. (i) The phenomenal, lived body is my access to the world, my openness to the world, and, yet, it is also a thing. It is of their kind. The phenomenal body is a sensing *sensible*. The toucher is capable of being touched. The seer is capable of being seen. This two-dimensionality and reversibility of the body is made explicit, not created, by the presence of the other. I am a seer who is actually seen by another. Thus, the turning back of the body on itself prefigures what comes to be called self-consciousness. (ii) It must be reemphasized, however, that for Merleau-Ponty the phenomenal body is not just a thing or a thing capable of being seen from the outside. It is a *sensing* sensible. The body is an openness or access to other bodies and things. The body as self or consciousness is thus the other side of the visible. It is that which reveals the thing. Merleau-Ponty says that the body as self or consciousness is a negative.

“The negative here is not a positive that is elsewhere (a transcendent)--It is a true negative, i.e., an *Unverborgenheit of the Vorborgenheit*, an *Urpräsentation* of the *Nichturpräsenturbar*, in other words, an original *elsewhere*, a *Selbst* that is an Other, a

Hollow--Hence no sense in saying the touched--touching junction is made by Thought or
Consciousness: Thought or Consciousness is *Offenheit* of a corporeity to...World or
Being." (VI, p. 254)

The body, then, prefigures what comes to be called consciousness, for the body as self is an openness onto being. It is the other side of the visible, that which makes the visible appear but which is itself invisible. The self as experiencer can never be captured or turned into an object by reflective thought because it is always that which is doing the experiencing. Yet this does not make the experiencer transcendental, as it does in the idealist's thought. The experiencer for Merleau-Ponty is the openness of a corporeity, the other side of the visible, not the consciousness of a transcendental ego. (iii) It can now also be seen that the two-dimensional human body prefigures the relationship to the other, for it is the original experience of that which is other, the original elsewhere. Contained within the very structure of the human body is a relationship to that which is other. Contained within the body is an experience of a self that is other, a self that is not positive but an openness to the other, a self (the experiencer's own self) that is other, since it only experiences itself as being at the thing, as an invisible that reveals the visible. This then is how the body is the bearer of self-consciousness, consciousness and the relation to the other. Clearly, for Merleau-Ponty consciousness, self-consciousness and the relationship to the other are all prefigured in the human body.

Merleau-Ponty's analysis can now be fully comprehended and it can be seen that human beings are able to obtain some sense of their own *individuality* because each possesses a body, because there is a unity of experience within the human body, and because the body subject is aware that it is capable of being seen from the outside. But this concept of individuality also includes a prepersonal, pre-individual element. The experience of a subject overlaps with that of other subjects because of the marvelous structure of the human body, because bodily experience blends in a chiasm the subjective and the worldly. The body as pre-personal blends with what it is not, it blends with that which is other than and beyond it. Both myself and the other are able to truly share experience because we both participate in an anonymous visibility. Unlike the analysis performed by the classical psychologist and Sartre, Merleau-Ponty's analysis claims that the individual's experience is internally linked with the other's experience. Just as

was seen earlier with Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the child's experience, it can now be seen that one's individuality includes an internal relationship to others; my experience overlaps with the experience that another has. Thus *my* world is also a shared world, *my* consciousness is also immediately and intimately linked with the other's.

A clear indication of Merleau-Ponty's dialectical approach is now in view, for it can now be seen that the self and the other form a system; they define and form each other. It can now be seen that the explicit sense of individuality is formed in a relationship with the other, that the *explicit* sense of individuality requires the presence of the other. It has also been witnessed that the recognition of the other as another human being is prefigured, and requires this prefiguring, in the body subject's openness onto the world. The body subject experiences itself as a self that is other. Hence, just as the recognition of oneself is tied to the recognition of the other, the recognition of the other is intimately linked with the structure of the incarnate self. Just as subjectivity and individuality require the relationship to the other, so the other and intersubjectivity require the presence of the self. This is truly a dialectical understanding of individuality (subjectivity) and the other (intersubjectivity), for it can now be seen that for Merleau-Ponty they form a circle. One simply cannot be understood without reference to the other.

A conclusion from the preceding analysis can now be reached: Merleau-Ponty does not abandon phenomenology. It has been observed that for Merleau-Ponty there is a sensing sensible, a conscious body subject in contact with the world, and that at least part of what Merleau-Ponty is doing in his last study is describing the experience of this sensing sensible. Even though he is not describing the experience of an isolated ego or knowing subject, Merleau-Ponty is still describing experience. He is describing the experience of a self that is the openness of the body onto the world, and this openness of the self as body is a *conscious* experience as well as being a dimensional or structural one. Insofar as he is describing the lived experience of this dimensional body subject he is doing phenomenology. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty's description of the body as a two-dimensional being is one that is grounded in experience. The body as touching/touched is being described from the point of view of that experiencing body. The body is certainly not being described from a point of view outside of it as if it were an object like any other object. The body is the object through which we approach or experience the world,

through which we are conscious of the world. Hence Merleau-Ponty does not abandon phenomenology or the individual, even though the individual is now embedded in the body and various structures or relationships. It is certainly not accurate to say that Merleau-Ponty is abandoning the subject in favor of objective relationships, in favor of seeing the subject as a passive result of objective structures, as some structuralists would do.¹⁸ It would be accurate to say that Merleau-Ponty is describing a self or subject that is structural, that is a relationship to others and the world. Merleau-Ponty is attempting to describe a structural or dimensional being with two sides or aspects, a body that is a blend of the subjective and objective. He is attempting to describe the interworld of lived experience out of which the explicit distinctions between the subjective and the objective arise. He is describing the interworld where the subjective and objective, consciousness and thing cleave together, where the parts, the subject and the worldly, fuse in an inseparable structural whole. In a word, he is attempting to dialectically combine phenomenology and structuralism.

Thus far I have attempted to accomplish the first two stated goals of this essay. I have attempted to reveal Merleau-Ponty's very original dialectical understanding of subjectivity and intersubjectivity and to show, by means of this revelation, that Merleau-Ponty does not abandon phenomenology. Rather, he dialectically integrates phenomenology and structuralism. The third goal, to reveal the consequences of this analysis for political theory and practice, remains to be completed.

IV.

The above insights can be moved into the political arena by considering Merleau-Ponty's analysis of class consciousness. The analysis of class consciousness will help in the attempt to grasp the political consequences of Merleau-Ponty's dialectical view of subjectivity and intersubjectivity and will provide the contrast to Sartre's Cartesian view that I promised above. In this section I will also investigate Aronson's claim that Merleau-Ponty abandons Marxism.

Merleau-Ponty begins his analysis with a statement about traditional approaches to class consciousness. "Objective thought", he says, "derives class consciousness from the objective conditions of the proletariat. Idealist reflection reduces the proletarian condition to the awareness of it, which the proletarian arrives at." (PP, p. 443) Merleau-Ponty will provide an alternative to these views by using a

mode of analysis that focuses on concrete experience. For it is by using this method that he believes we can best shed light on the phenomenon of class consciousness. Using this method he will begin with the claim that the individual first prereflectively exists or lives through the conditions of his or her class. This concrete lived experience then becomes the basis for the explicit judgment about class membership and provides the motives for class or group projects. (PP, p. 443)

“My fellow workers...do the same work as I do in comparable conditions; we 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.” (PP, p. 444)

“Social space begins to acquire a magnetic field, and a region of the exploited is seen to appear. At every pressure felt from quarter of the social horizon, the process of regrouping becomes clearly discernible beyond ideologies and various occupations. Class is coming into being... (PP, p. 445)

The *Phenomenology of Perception* provides some illuminating examples but it can be seen from even these few extrapolated sentences that for Merleau-Ponty the individual's existence is a social existence, a co-existence. This point has been revealed in the preceding pages and it will be analyzed in greater detail below, but first consider a few brief passages that may be applied to Sartre's work.

“It will perhaps be objected, from the idealist side, that I am not, for myself, a particular project, but a pure consciousness, and that the attributes of bourgeois or worker belong to me only to the extent that I place myself among others, and see myself through their eyes, from the outside, as ‘another’. Here we should have categories of For Others and not For Oneself. But if there were two sorts of categories, how could I have the experience of another, i.e., of an alter ego? This experience presupposes that already my view of myself is halfway to having the quality of a possible ‘other’, and that in my view of another person is implied his quality as ego.” (PP, p. 448)

“If the other people who empirically exist are to be, for me, other people, I must have a means of recognizing them, and the structures of the For Another must, therefore, already be the dimensions of the For Oneself. (PP, p. 448)

This criticism of the idealist approach can equally well be applied to Sartre, if not to the mature Sartre, then at least to his early position. Recall that in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre claims that the presence of the other labels the free spontaneous subject from the outside. The subject becomes engaged in a battle of freedoms. Either I label you or you label me. But also recall the emphasis that the mature Sartre puts on "the third man" (I am a member of a group primarily because my relationship to others is perceived from the outside). This is precisely what Merleau-Ponty is arguing against here. He is arguing against the lack of a dialectic, he is arguing for a mediating position, a social dimension, between the self and the other, between closed Cartesian individuals, and, as was also seen in *The Visible and the Invisible*, he is arguing for an understanding of the self that already contains a relationship to the other. Sartre is never able to overcome the Cartesianism of both *Being and Nothingness* and "The Communist and Peace".¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty also argued against this position in *Adventures of the Dialectic* by claiming that Sartre could not develop a genuine dialectic because his categories are too exclusive, with opaque existence being set against a transparent consciousness and the isolated ego set against the other. These categories are unable to produce the middle ground in which mutual human recognition and history could take place.²⁰ Even with his admirable and monumental effort, the *Critique*, which is undoubtedly a response to Merleau-Ponty's criticism,²¹ Sartre is unable or unwilling to overcome Merleau-Ponty's critique. In fact, James Schmidt draws our attention to an interesting comment by Sartre on this very point.

"I admit neither that I have the same philosophy as Merleau-Ponty nor that there is an element of the interworld...The entire ontology that emerges from Merleau-Ponty is distinct from mine. It is more of a continuum than mine. I am not much of a continuist; the in-itself and the for-itself, and the intermediary forms...that is enough for me".²²

What Sartre thus ends up doing in the *Critique* is grafting a philosophy of the (Cartesian) individual onto some outdated Marxist and narrowly materialist concepts of history. Merleau-Ponty does not abandon Marxism, and it is he that develops the truly dialectical position that holds together self and world, self and other in a fundamental fusion. Merleau-Ponty develops a view that is far superior to Sartre's, one that may plausibly be used to guide social theory and practice.

"I must, therefore, in the most radical reflection, apprehend around my absolute

individuality a kind of halo of generality or a kind of atmosphere of 'sociality'. This is necessary if subsequently the words 'a bourgeois' or 'a man' are to be able to assume meaning for me. I must apprehend myself immediately as centered in a way outside myself, and my individual existence must diffuse round itself, so to speak, an existence in quality... My life must have a significance which I do not constitute; there must strictly speaking be an intersubjectivity." (PP, p. 448)

Just as was seen above, Merleau-Ponty once again defines the individual in terms of social relations. He does not begin, as Sartre does, with an isolated individual who then joins his project with the projects of other individual subjects. Rather, he begins with an existential situation in which the line between the individual and the other cannot be clearly drawn. This is a view that escapes the individualism of Descartes and the capitalist tradition, a view that on the contrary comprehends the social dimension and relatedness of the individual's life. Yet it is a position that also escapes the dehumanization of the Soviet and structuralist position that collapses the individual into social relations. Within this dialectical analysis that holds together the subjective and objective, the individual and the group, individuality is not overcome but realized. The individual and the universal become intertwined, the individual genuinely shares life with the community.

I agree with Aronson that Merleau-Ponty becomes disaffected with Soviet and communist politics. I would also state that Merleau-Ponty is critical of a materialist dialectic (manifest in the Soviet Union) which places the movement of history in things (as Merleau-Ponty believes the mature Marx does) rather than a relation between people mediated by things (as the young Marx claims).²³ However, I would not agree that Merleau-Ponty totally abandons Marxism. Aronson seems to forget that being critical of the Soviet communism or even Marxism itself does not necessarily mean that one is totally abandoning the political left.²⁴ Aronson claims in "The Vicissitudes of the Dialectic" that Merleau-Ponty rejected Marxism as having been wrong all along" (p. 365), that he "renounces both Marxist philosophy and politics" (p. 367), and that his "critique foredooms *all* such efforts [by the Frankfurt School and others] to separate a more authentic Marxism from the official Marxisms, and to find the possibility of a new political orientation" (p. 370). While it is true that Merleau-Ponty does not see the problems within

the Soviet Union as a result of historical contingencies, and that he does see some problems with Marxism itself (i.e., with a materialistic reductionism that justifies the authoritarian movement of the state), Merleau-Ponty does not "foredoom" the development of an authentic Marxism. In fact, what he is trying to establish with his critique (of a materialist dialectic that justifies authoritarian politics) is the development of a political left that is consciously and authentically democratic. Moreover, his treatment (and what he sees as the young Marx's treatment) of society as a *social whole* made it possible to affiliate with the political left without being a reductionistic materialist. Far from making a "new political orientation" impossible, Merleau-Ponty makes a significant contribution to the atmosphere in which Western Marxism (a phrase he is credited with introducing) and the New Left were formed. In fact, in *Adventures of the Dialectic* we see Merleau-Ponty explicitly calling for a "non-communist left", for it is only a non-communist left that can remain critical of both communism and capitalism. It can remain critical of communism (thus fulfilling the communist dictum of self-criticism and continual revolution) because this criticism escapes the suppression that it would surely encounter in the Soviet Union or the Communist Party, and it remains critical of capitalism because it is critical of any society that contains a proletarian class. This hardly sounds like a total abandonment of Marxism. Merleau-Ponty remains vitally interested in Marxism and at a very fundamental level. In fact, it is his reworking of the concepts of consciousness, the individual, and intersubjectivity that provide a balanced and plausible basis for a political/social theory that recognizes the individual, but that also recognizes the individual as a social being, that is, that does not collapse the individual into social relations and social relations into a materialistic dialectic. This represents part of Merleau-Ponty's effort to pick up and go beyond (in the sense of Hegel's concept of *aufheben*: to express at a higher level) Marx's concepts, not completely abandon them.

I offer as further evidence of the claim that Merleau-Ponty does not abandon the political left the introduction to his *Signs*,²⁵ written in 1960. This introduction or essay was written shortly before Merleau-Ponty's death and was therefore the last of his political writings that he was able to see published. Marxism is the primary subject matter of the essay and he begins by inquiring about the status of Marxism in 1960. Merleau-Ponty proceeds to argue that Marxism is no longer true in the sense that it was when it was developed by Marx, that the categories Marx used should not necessarily be

abandoned but neither should they simply be reapplied to a social world one hundred years older. Marx's concepts should be used as a heuristic device. (S, p.9)

Merleau-Ponty further argues that philosophy as Marx had conceived it has not yet brought about its own destruction. Philosophy, for Marx, was seen as a vision for the future that could not be fulfilled in the present, and the attempted actualization of this idealization would bring about the need to keep the abstract system alive. When the ideal was finally realized there would no longer be a need for philosophy. Philosophy would bring about its own destruction from within. It would bring about its own destruction by realizing itself in events. Merleau-Ponty frankly states that this has not occurred. Philosophy has not been swallowed up by historical events. But, he further argues, neither is it to be thought of as a detached God-like survey of the natural and social world (S, pp. 13-14, 21). Philosophy must be utilized to rethink many important issues and concepts, and Merleau-Ponty provides us with a brief outline of some of his own attempts at this rethinking. These are the topics that he touches upon: knowledge (S, pp. 14-15), our natural environment (S, p. 15), the relationship to the other (S, pp. 15-17), speech and its relationship to thought (S, pp. 17-19), history, and finally philosophy itself (S, pp. 21-22). This is a rather serious undertaking, to say the least, but Merleau-Ponty believes that this rethinking must be accomplished. The philosophical foundations of Marxism especially must be reexamined. Thus, it is inappropriate and inaccurate to say that Merleau-Ponty abandons Marxism. Quite the contrary, he states that there is a need for a fundamental reworking, and a *reworking* is not a total abandonment. Merleau-Ponty remains engaged at a fundamental level. Unfortunately, because of an early death, he was unable to finish this complex task. The philosophical world is fortunate, however, to have the notes on which he was working during the last years of his life. These notes have been published in the form of *The Visible and the Invisible*.

In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty uses a Saussurean insight (i.e., language as a system of differences) to develop a new ontology and, as can be seen from the above, a new analysis of social relations. Merleau-Ponty also suggests in his inaugural lecture at the *Collège de France* that Saussure's work is also relevant to the philosophy of history.²⁶ As I have already indicated, at least part of what Merleau-Ponty is doing in these later, more mature works is attempting to go beyond his earlier

use of the Cartesian cogito in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. In *The Visible and the Invisible* it was seen that there is a chiasm, that is, a fusion or a cleaving together, of the self and that which is other, a true dialectical blending. I have tried to make this analysis more applicable to the political by briefly looking at selected passages from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. However, to avoid any risk of confusing Merleau-Ponty's earlier "Cartesian" position with his later studies, and to further reveal Merleau-Ponty's reworking (not abandonment) of Marxism, it will be helpful to consider how the later political and historical works embody the same dialectic or chiasm found in *The Visible and the Invisible*. I will attempt to show how Merleau-Ponty uses Saussurean insights to develop a new theory of history and politics.

The same chiasm that is found between the self and the world and between the self and the other is also found in language.

"Living language is precisely that togetherness of thinking and thing which causes the difficulty. In the act of speaking, the subject, in his tone and his style, bears witness to his autonomy, since nothing is more proper to him, and yet at the same moment, and without contradiction, he is turned toward the linguistic community and is dependent on his language. The will to speak is one and the same as the will to be understood. The presence of the individual in the institution and of the institution in the individual is evident in the case of linguistic change." (IPP, pp. 54-55)

Here within the structure of linguistic change is found a very clear statement of the fusion or cleaving together of self and the other. "The will to speak is one and the same as the will to be understood."

Language, which is not the creation of an individual subject, which exists as an intersubjective phenomenon of which the subject is a part, requires, nevertheless, the presence of individual speakers.

On the same page Merleau-Ponty goes on to draw a parallel between the chiasm in language between the individual and the community of speakers and the chiasm between the individual and history.

"The reciprocal relations between the will to express and the means of expression correspond to those between the productive forces and the forms of production, and more generally, between historical forces and institutions. Just as language is a system of

signs which have meaning only in relation to one another...so each institution is a symbolic system that the subject takes over and incorporates as a style of functioning, as a global configuration, without having any need to conceive it at all. When equilibrium is destroyed, the reorganizations which take place comprise, like those of language, an internal logic even though it may not be clearly thought out by anyone. They are polarized by the fact that, as participants in a system of symbols, we exist in the eyes of one another, with one another, in such a way that changes in language are due to our will to speak and be understood.” (IPP, pp. 55-56)

Merleau-Ponty thus believes that he can model the movement of history after the movement of language. He believes that he has found in Saussure a means for circumventing the problem of where to place the movement of history. Rather than placing it within material conditions alone (as the Soviet Marxists do) or within the consciousness of the individuals (as Sartre tends to do), Merleau-Ponty places it in the cultural realm of symbols, in the intersubjective realm that rests upon and appropriates the material world. Just as the individual takes up a linguistic system of which he or she is a part, without comprehending the whole, in order to express him or herself, so too individuals take up their historical institutions in order to gain recognition. This is how history moves. It moves as a result of the will for mutual recognition within the context of social institutions that include relationships to things. The same chiasm, the same cleaving together, of the subject and the other (the other as the world and other people) is found here in the attempt to understand the movement of history that is found in language and that is found in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

Thus, just as at the level of language and ontology, there is at the level of history a chiasm or dialectical crisscross between the subject and the other. Merleau-Ponty does not want the individual to be *absorbed* into the group, a class,²⁷ or a State dominated by Party officials. Groups, classes, society and the State must be understood as individuals in interaction seeking mutual recognition within the context of material conditions and social institutions. The freedom of expression, the will to express of the individual, is not eliminated by Merleau-Ponty. It is seen to be in a chiasm with other members of the community. The individual and the community reflect each other, are in a dialectical crisscross with

each other. It is this chiasm, of each with all the others, mediated by things and social institutions, that is the working out of history.

I have now completed the three goals with which I began this essay. I have revealed the "mature" Merleau-Ponty's theory of subjectivity and intersubjectivity as it is scattered across his written works. This in itself is important because a benefit can be derived from Merleau-Ponty's significant but somewhat dispersed insights. By analyzing his theory, I have, in addition, attempted to display his remarkable and original dialectical approach, an approach that fuses the self and the other, the subjective and objective, phenomenology and structuralism. I have thus argued that it is inappropriate to say that Merleau-Ponty abandons phenomenology for structuralism. He clearly combines them. And finally, I have attempted to connect these first two points with a third. I have attempted to show how Merleau-Ponty's dialectical understanding of subjectivity and intersubjectivity can be used to grasp his political theory and his philosophy of history. I have attempted to show that Merleau-Ponty's approach can be used in a way that provides a much more plausible foundation for Marxism than Sartre's view, even the mature view of Sartre's *Critique*. In a way we might think of Merleau-Ponty as the real young Marx, for he develops a philosophically rigorous foundation for the young Marx's vision of a society and history based on mutual recognition, a society based on the relationship between people mediated by things, not simply one based on things and their immanent necessities. (AD, p. 84) Merleau-Ponty's original and balanced theory of subjectivity and intersubjectivity allows him to come between an alienating view that reduces human beings to mere objects and an overly self-conscious view that puts the control of all events in the minds of isolated individuals. It is Merleau-Ponty's view that most enlightens political and social theory and practice. It is his view that philosophers, political theorists, and political activists would do well to adopt.

ENDNOTES

1. See James Schmidt's *Maurice Merleau-Ponty Between Phenomenology and Structuralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985) for an excellent overview of this topic, especially pp. 48-57 and 160-167.
2. This turn of phrase is used by Merleau-Ponty. See *Humanism and Terror*, trans. J. O'Neill (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 3. For a discussion of orthodox, scientific Marxism, including the structuralist Marxists, see Alvin Gouldner's *The Two Marxisms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), especially pp. 98 ff.
3. See Marx's treatment of alienation, including the estrangement from others, in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, edited and trans. by L. Easton and K. Guddat in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 295 ff. See also Erich Fromm *The Sane Society* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1955), particularly pp. 62-64. Philip Slater *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1970), pp. 5 ff.
4. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968). Hereafter cited as VI.
5. Ronald Aronson "Vicissitudes of the Dialectic: From Merleau-Ponty's *Les Aventures De La Dialectique* to Sartre's second *Critique*", in *The Philosophical Forum*, XVIII:4 (1987), p. 358.
6. *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Volume I, trans. A. Sheridan-Smith (London: NLB, 1976) and Volume II, which has not been translated, (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).
7. Aronson "Vicissitudes of the Dialectic", op. cit., p. 365.
8. Ibid., p. 370, and pp. 376 ff.
9. *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1953). I will focus on Part Three "Being-For-Others" especially Chapter One, section IV, "The Look", and Chapter Three, section III, "'Being-With' (Mitsein) and the 'We'".
10. Ibid., pp. 315-318 and 347-379.
11. *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 47.
12. *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Volume I, op. cit. See section "The Fused Group", particularly p. 354.
13. Ibid., in addition to "The Fused Group" see also the section entitled "Need", pp. 79-83, where Sartre begins the *social* dialectic with the dialectic of the *individual*.
14. *Phenomenology of Perception* trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962). See Chapter 4 "Other People and the Human World", particularly pp. 347-358. Hereafter cited as PP.
15. *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays* ed. J. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964). Hereafter cited as PrP.
16. Martin Heidegger *Being and Time* trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 154-155.

17. I have utilized and analyzed some of these passages for another purpose in another article, "Merleau-Ponty Speaks to Rorty", currently being considered for publication.
18. See Gouldner's *The Two Marxisms*, op. cit.
19. Sartre *The Communists and Peace* trans. M. Fletcher, J. Kleinschmidt, P. Berk (New York: Braziller, 1968).
20. Merleau-Ponty *Adventures of the Dialectic* trans. J. Bien (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 124 and 142. Hereafter cited as AD.
21. Aronson "The Vicissitudes of the Dialectic", op. cit., pp. 364 ff. See also Douglas Low *The Existential Dialectic of Marx and Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), pp. 71 ff.
22. Schilpp ed., *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, p. 43. Quoted by Schmidt *Maurice Merleau-Ponty Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*, op. cit., p. 190, footnote 171.
23. AD, p. 84.
24. Aronson "The Vicissitudes of the Dialectic", op. cit.
25. Merleau-Ponty *Signs* trans. R. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964). Hereafter cited as S.
26. Published as *In Praise of Philosophy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963). Hereafter cited as IPP.
27. This is not to say that Merleau-Ponty abandons class analysis. He argues, in fact, that class analysis is still appropriate because classes still exist.