The Relevancy of Merleau-Ponty’s Political Theory

by Douglas Low

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Introduction

Merleau-Ponty’s political ideas, formed approximately fifty years ago, are still remarkably relevant today. In this paper I will provide a brief summary of his two mid-century political treatises, set his “new liberalism” and “non-communist left” against traditional liberalism and the left of the communist orthodoxy, and attempt to apply his position to turn of the century conditions and events. I will conclude with a brief consideration of how Merleau-Ponty’s left liberalism is community based.

Merleau-Ponty’s Political Theory

In Humanism and Terror, Merleau-Ponty’s first political treatise, written shortly after WWII, he states that the liberal values of Western democracies are associated with individual conscience, truth based on knowledge, the order of law, and with an appeal to universality and equality, that is, to legal and moral principles applied consistently to all. Merleau-Ponty supports these values, as he believes Marx does, but finds, as does Marx, that they are often not practiced as they are preached by Western societies. In fact, these societies often display a dramatic gap between theory and practice, for their appeal to law frequently justifies exploitation and suppression by force both at home and abroad. Moreover, liberalism often justifies its use of force by appeal to rational argument, but, Merleau-Ponty argues, this rationality is its rationality, even the rationality of its dominant class, and it is neither absolute nor already established, as has often been presumed. This, of course, implies that the supposed purity of its principles is not so pure, for it frequently does not recognize that it is not the rational law of all things and, subsequently, its own face in its forceful and sometimes even violent imposition of its values and norms upon others. The West believes it brings truth, morality, and prosperity to all, but it is frequently not perceived
this way by all. And this is not just a matter of a faulty perception or the lack of the proper public relations campaign. It is often the matter of substantial disagreements, disagreements that are often ignored or sometimes not even perceived by the West. Here, in this text, as early as 1947, Merleau-Ponty offers the remedy of what is now called a multicultural approach, for he argues that rationality remains to be established and will only be established by listening to all voices, even those of whom we may disagree. (*Humanism and Terror*, trans. J. O’Neill, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, pp. xiii, xli, 35 note, 187)

In *Humanism and Terror* Merleau-Ponty still has hope for Marx’s vision of a proletarian revolution to establish a more democratic society. Given that this will be the first revolution of the majority of the population, society will be based on majority or even universal interests and not just the interests of a small dominant class, as has been the case in all previous societies. In *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Merleau-Ponty’s second political treatise, published in 1955, he abandons this hope. His main reason for doing so was that this sort of view, the view of the communist orthodoxy, assumed a mechanistic tendency toward social, political, and economic revolution. He here more appropriately reasons that there is no automatic movement of history, the seeds of which are in socio-economic events or the human essence and its drive toward freedom. There may well be certain tendencies in certain socio-economic structures but there is no fixed logic of future development. Moreover, human nature is malleable enough to accept a variety of social, political, and economic conditions and, subsequently, is not predestined for any one of them. We have learned from history what does not work, he concludes, but we have not definitively learned what does or will work. (*Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. J. Bien, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, pp. 65ff, 77. Hereafter cited as AD.)

It is also reasonable to surmise that Merleau-Ponty abandons the hope of a proletarian revolution because he was fully aware of the growth of a large middle class in Western societies by the mid 1950’s and that social allegiances may be formed along a variety if lines other than that of class, as Max Weber had already maintained a generation before. (AD 9ff) Yet in
Adventures of the Dialectic Merleau-Ponty thinks that class analysis is still important because, frankly,…classes still exist. Socio-economic groups tend to act in their interest, tend to at least try to enhance their economic and social standing, even if this is difficult to do so uniformly and with consistency. Merleau-Ponty is fully aware that democracy, truth and freedom are only possible within certain socio-economic conditions, and that these conditions were ushered in by capitalism. (AD 9) Yet he also says that the continued existence of classes in capitalist societies make the possibility of a truly representative democracy highly problematic. (AD 225)

Merleau-Ponty does not abandon the hope of a more democratic society. What he abandons is the hope that this will be accomplished by a proletarian revolution. Yet, it is clear from the above that he does not completely abandon the political left, for he will continue to use Marx’s analysis and criticism of capitalism, particularly of its class structure, to make sense of and criticize current institutions and events. He claims that the class structure of capitalism continues to interfere with democracy.

The claim can be made, then, that Merleau-Ponty’s political treatises, taken together, continue to support democracy, since both works strongly support the democratic process, i.e., the equal participation in the political life of the community by all citizens of that community. The early work hopes that this will be accomplished by a working class revolution that establishes a classless society, while the later work arrives at the belief that parliamentary democracies, at least in the circumstances of the mid-20th Century, are the best means yet to achieve this goal, for they provide at least a minimum of access to the political process by the majority of the population. The later work also explicitly agrees that the aim of political action should be the increased awareness of and equal participation in the political process by all adult members of the society. Both political treatises also support various liberal principles, such as, the order of law, equality of opportunity, and a minimalist moral/political framework. The order of law is supported because it implies the equal consideration of all in the creation and enforcement of the law. The equality of opportunity is supported because a society should give access to its goods and services
in a way that is not greatly imbalanced by the structure of class, or by any other unfair advantage.
And finally, the minimalist position is supported because the whole point of a minimalist framework such as “do what you want as long as no harm is brought to another” is to establish a principle of social constraint that grants as much freedom as possible to the individuals that must submit to the constraint. Minimalist systems, such as that immediately above, constrain only the behavior that directly harms another. Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy would support such a framework, since, for him, there is no pre-established formal rationality by which all are likely to agree to a more comprehensive system. Rationality, rather, is established because humans have similar bodies that open upon the world in similar ways. Yet because we are only similar, and not identical in either body or mind, differences, and subsequently the possibility of conflict, remain. Since it is more difficult to reach consensus or even majority agreement on comprehensive issues then it is on minimalist ones, and since Merleau-Ponty is acutely aware of the differences between human beings, as well as their similarities, his philosophy is consistent with an approach that allows the greatest expression of differences, as long as no harm is brought to another, that is, with a minimalist approach that grants the greatest amount of freedom of action and conscience to its individual citizens. Yet unlike traditional liberalism, Merleau-Ponty’s new liberalism/non-communist left argues that the rights of the individuals are established not by a natural law grasped intuitively by all rational minds, but are negotiated by embodied beings who are engaged in an already existing natural and social world. Rights are established by people making claims to one another in already existing communities, communities that must be supported if these rights are to continue to exist. Merleau-Ponty’s liberal values are thus community based.

As we can observe immediately above, Merleau-Ponty does not abandon the possibility of shared experience and even of rational agreement. In fact, he is quite explicit about not abandoning rationality, logic or presence. What he seeks to do is place them in a broader context. He seeks to place the thematized, the objectified, the abstract and reflective back in contact with their origins, with a pre-reflective perceptual openness upon a patterned but not fully formed and
precise world. Following the studies of Gestalt psychology, Merleau-Ponty claims that the simplest element of perception is a figure against a background. The figure is focused upon and is usually presented with some clarity. While the background helps articulate the foreground, it remains implied and out of focus. Presence therefore occurs within the context of absence and difference. It is referential, open and fluid, but it does occur—in perception as well as in the sublimated structures of language. (Phenomenology of Perception, trans. C. Smith, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962, pp. 3-4. Hereafter cited as PhP. See also The Visible and the Invisible, trans. A. Lingis, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968, p. 213. Hereafter cited as VI.)

The principles of logic, then, are to be regarded as abstractions from sense experience that are neither absolute nor arbitrary. They help stabilize the flow of perceptions, yet they themselves are suggested by the perception. This relationship has been appropriately referred to as a non-reciprocal reversibility, for perception remains the primary term for more abstract thought and language, yet thought and language fold back upon the ambiguously perceived to help articulate and express it more clearly. And just as the body must adjust itself to the world to perceive with a maximum of clarity and detail (if I stand to close to a painting, I cannot take it in as a perceptual whole, and if I stand too far away, I cannot see the detail that helps create the impression of the whole), (PhP 250) so also language must adjust itself to the gestures of perception to express them with a maximum of clarity and detail. (PhP 187, 403) Since words contain some emotional/sensual value, since a words meaning is associated with our emotional and needful encounter with the world and others, certain expressions will express this encounter more accurately than others, as, for example, a shout or scream expresses our encounter with a life threatening event more appropriately than a laugh or a snicker. An expression is true, then, if it “hits the mark,” if it makes sense of our encounter with the world and others. (See Bernard Waldenfels “Verite a Faire: Merleau-Ponty’s Question Concerning Truth” in Philosophy Today, Summer 1991, pp. 190, 192.) No expression is exhaustive or complete, for nature is infinite and open to a variety of human interpretations. Yet some expressions work better than others, for just as the
body is limited in its encounter with the world, just as it cannot make the world anything it wants, so language is likewise limited.

Rationality for Merleau-Ponty is thus something different from the modernist adherence to pre-existent forms of thought and logic proposed by the liberal tradition. Since rationality is connected to the shifting contingencies of perceptual structure, rationality is provisional and open and remains to be established. Yet since perception displays relatively stable patterns, the structures of rationality are not arbitrary and themselves remain stable. They may well act as guiding ideas, ideas that must be continually checked against the structures of perception and against the perceptions experienced by others. Rationality can thus be defined as an agreement of perceptual profiles, of mine within me as I actively open upon the world, and of mine with those of others as we actively open upon the world together. (PhP xix) And while it is true that one system of rationality may be better than another, because it offers greater clarity and adaptation, and because it solves problems that others cannot, it is also true that the system must continue to prove itself as such, and it must do so from a variety of perspectives.

Merleau-Ponty thus focuses on an *embodied* rationality, but this in no way implies a biological or materialist reductionism. First of all, Merleau-Ponty adheres to a subtle and complex form of emergentism, that the human species has evolved from simpler forms of life to which the species can no longer be reduced. Now, humans are certainly influenced by their environment, yet because of a more complex form of phylogenic development we have the capacity to pause and reflect upon our environment and our behavior within it. We can break the rigid chain of material cause and effect. This does not mean that we can step completely out of it, but we have enough awareness to take up our conditions and our past in order to try to move them in a different direction. Secondly, and subsequently, when attempting to understand human beings, their communities, and their behavior within them, *all* aspects of human experience must be taken into account. (AD 11ff) We must attempt to understand not just the biological or economic aspects of human experience and behavior, but also religion, art, politics and law. To gain access to this
general milieu, this life-world within which these aspects interact and flow into one another, here in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Merleau-Ponty appeals to the young Marx and his notion that human labor inscribes meaning into nature. (AD 38, 143) When laborers perceive their creations, they are able to perceive their own subjective forms impressed upon them, including certain habitualized forms of behavior and common human relationships. Human experience thus opens upon not only a material world but also a human one. Humans are born into not only a material world but also into certain economic, social and political institutions, into patterned ways of acting into and interpreting the world, including so-called forms of discourse. We take up these patterns, usually without understanding the whole, in order to gain recognition, to confirm satisfactory relationships and challenge dissatisfactory ones. And this is how history moves: individuals living in the present take up the past in the form of customs and institutions, grasping them only incompletely, and attempt to move them toward a more satisfactory future. Moreover, if people do not have legitimate ways to do this, they will often seek other means, including “underground” economies, violence and even terror.

Merleau-Ponty thus thinks of *historical rationality* as the confirmation of social/political/economic solutions by succeeding generations, the elimination of conflicts and attempts that did not work, and the move toward greater participation and harmony. (AD 77, 203ff) This rationality is not the already established rationality of the liberal tradition, but is a rationality in the making. It is a rationality that must prove itself to each of those involved, that must be worked out in actual events, and that must prove itself to each generation. Even though Merleau-Ponty is critical of the West’s ethnocentrism, its frequent blindness to its own assumptions, its consideration of *its* rationality as the only rationality, he recognizes the ethnocentrism of other cultures as well. He therefore thinks that to date it is Western parliamentary democracies that have most approached the ideal of rational agreement. Yet, he exclaims, we must still call into question the assumptions of Western rationality, point out the interest of the dominant class in its “rational arguments,” and we must continue to point out
where democracy does not live up to its ideals, always in an attempt to move toward increased
democratic participation by all. Again, we can do this by pointing out the gap between
democracy’s theory and practice, between its ideals and what it actually does, between its claim
to universal access to the economic and political process, on the one hand, and the inequitable
influence of classes, on the other.

Reflections on Current Events

With these goals in mind, let us now turn to current economic conditions in the U.S. and how
they undermine, first, democracy (one person/one vote), second, liberal principles (do what you
want as long as you do not harm or deny another, another’s property, or another’s freedom;
equality under the law; equality of opportunity), and third, identification with the community—
principles that in general Merleau-Ponty supports and that in general he warns may be corrupted
by the class structure of capitalism.

Sociologist agree that social stratification exists in the United States, that this stratification is
based in large part on economic stratification, and that this stratification lends itself to the
formation of social and economic classes. More specifically, G. William Domhoff’s two
that there is an upper class in the U.S. and that it dominates both economic and political policy.
While the brief review of Domhoff’s thesis that follows may well be unnecessary for most
readers, it may well be useful to some and attempts to provide a documentation that all will find
compelling. Moreover, if Domhoff is correct, as the evidence will show, then U.S. democracy,
liberal principles and identification with the community will all be seriously undermined. Let us
briefly investigate Domhoff’s claims, with an eye toward the evidence that he offers for them.

Domhoff argues that the following indicators can be used to demonstrate power or the ability
to influence others. 1.) “Who Benefits?”—by which he means the following: “Those who have
the most of what people want are, by inference, the powerful. Put another way, the distribution of
valued experiences and objects within a society can be viewed as the most visible and stable outcome of the operation of power…” (AN 11) 2.) “Who Governs?”—by which Domhoff means: “Power also can be inferred from the studies of who occupies important institutional positions and takes part in important decision-making groups. If a group or class is highly over-represented…in relation to its proportion of the population, it can be inferred that the group is relatively powerful…” (AN 12) 3.) “Who Wins?”—by which Domhoff means: “Power can be inferred from…issue conflicts by determining who successfully initiates, modifies, or vetoes policy alternatives.” (AN 12) Using these three indicators, Domhoff will argue that in the U.S. there is an upper class and that this class has a disproportionate influence on economic and political policy.

Along with social registers and elite social clubs and schools, the most compelling evidence for an upper class in the U.S. is income and wealth distribution. Domhoff points out that “studies…suggest that just 5% of all people in the United States own from 20% to 25% of all wealth [defined as marketable assets].” In addition, “since the 1950’s the top 5% of income earners…have received 14% to 16% of all income in the United States.” (AN 42) Supplementing Domhoff’s analysis with more recent figures, a clear view of income distribution and class structure in the U.S. comes into focus.


**Annual Family Income, US Census Bureau 2009**

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<th>Proportion of Households</th>
<th>Annual Family Income</th>
<th>Class</th>
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<td>5.0%</td>
<td>$200,000 and above</td>
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Notice that approximately 20% of U.S. households earn at least $100,000, and in some cases substantially more, while almost 30% earn less than $35,000, with US Census Bureau stating the following regarding the poor: "The official poverty rate in 2010 was 15.1 percent — up from 14.3 percent in 2009. This was the third consecutive annual increase in the poverty rate. Since 2007, the poverty rate has increased by 2.6 percentage points, from 12.5 percent to 15.1 percent. In 2010, 46.2 million people were in poverty, up from 43.6 million in 2009--the fourth consecutive annual increase in the number of people in poverty." (See US Department of Commerce, US Census Bureau at http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/about/overview/index.html)

Also notice that the middle and working classes comprise approximately 45% of U.S. households. In addition to revealing a strikingly large number of poor, these figures clearly show, to repeat, the existence of a large middle/working class, with approximately 45% of the U.S. households getting at least a small piece of the American pie. Yet the picture of income distribution comes into clearer focus if we observe the chart below, which divides the national income pie into fifths. (See US Census, Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2010, p. 11. The figures are for 2010. http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/p60-239.pdf)

**Percent Distribution of Total Income**

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<th>Percent Distribution of Total Income</th>
<th>Lowest 5th</th>
<th>Second 5th</th>
<th>Third 5th</th>
<th>Fourth 5th</th>
<th>Highest 5th</th>
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The chart above reveals that the top 5% of the earning population has 21.3% of the annual income, while the top 20% has 50.2%. This of course means that the other 80% of the earning population must divide the remaining 49.8% of the annual income. In addition, the figures on wealth are even more striking, for they reveal that the top 10% possess “85% to 90% of stocks, bonds, trust funds, and business equity, and over 75% of non-home real estate.” (See G. William Domhoff, “Wealth, Income, and Power”, 2009. 

http://sociology.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/wealth.html ) These cited figures show the stark difference of income in the U.S and that a vast amount of the nation’s wealth goes to a small percentage at the top. These figures coupled with other evidence (of social registers and elite clubs and schools) provide significant evidence for the claim that an upper class exists in the U.S.

In order to make the claim that the upper class dominates economic policy, Domhoff provides evidence “to show that 1.) members of the upper class own a majority of all privately held corporate stock in the United States; 2.) many large stockholders and stockholding families continue to be involved in the direction of major corporations; 3.) members of the upper class are disproportionately represented on boards of large corporations…; and 4.) the professional managers of middle-level origins who rise to the top of the corporations are assimilated into the upper class both socially and economically…” (AN 57)

In order to show that an upper class dominates public policy decisions Domhoff provides evidence for the following. “First, [members of the upper middle class and corporate community] finance the organizations that are at the core of these efforts. Second, they provide a variety of free services for some of the organizations in the network…Finally, they serve as directors and trustees of these organizations, setting their general directions and selecting the people who will manage their day-to-day operations.” (AN 82)
Domhoff’s evidence shows that members of the upper class and corporate communities dominate the financing of, the management of, and membership in important policy shaping organizations such as The Council of Foreign Relations (AN 85-88), The Committee for Economic Development (AN 88-89), The Conference Board (AN 89-90), as well as the financing and management of, if not membership in, foundations, think tanks, and research institutes. (AN 92-98)

Finally, Domhoff attempts to show that the “members of the power elite directly involve themselves in the federal government through three basic processes…,” 1.) the candidate selection process, 2.) the special interest process, and 3.) the policy-making process. (AN 116) To provide evidence for 1.) above, Domhoff informs us that the elite’s campaign contributions and favors to politicians far outweigh those by other groups. To provide evidence for 2.) above Domhoff reminds us that the special-interest process is one of the most documented relationships between big business and government. (AN 129-131) And finally, in his analysis of 3.) above, Domhoff sees three main groups involved in the struggle to enact policy in the federal government. Two of these groups are “rooted in the power elite and corporate community.” They are the moderate conservatives, rooted in the Council on Foreign Relations and the Committee for Economic Development, and the ultraconservatives, exemplified by the Chamber of Commerce of the United States, the Hoover Institute, and the American Enterprise Institute. “The third grouping…is the more loose knit and divided liberal-labor coalition that is rooted in trade unions, middle income liberal groups, environmental and consumer groups, university communities, and the foundations and advocacy groups financed by a few rich mavericks.” (AN 144) Domhoff shows that “generally speaking, the leanings of the moderate conservatives determine the outcome of any policy struggle.” (AN 144ff)

Domhoff’s *Who Rules America Now?* provides significant evidence showing that there is an upper class in the United States and that this class has an influence on economic and political policy disproportionate to its representation in the population. If Domhoff’s arguments are sound,
as I believe they generally are, the our current class and economic stratification in the U.S. rather seriously undermine its democratic process.

First, the current class and economic stratification undermines the democratic process as one person/one vote, for the wealthy clearly influence the political process well beyond their proportional representation in the population.

Secondly, the current class and economic stratification undermines the liberal principle of “do what you want as long as you do not harm another, another property, or another’s freedom,” for harm is brought to the middle class and especially the poor by the gross inequality of wealth and power. The whole point of the liberal principle is to express a principle for community that respects the rights of each individual. The whole purpose of the well known “state of nature” thesis (approached as a question: “how can individuals in a constraint free ‘state of nature’ enter a community without the loss of freedom, or with the loss of as little freedom as possible?”) is to find a principle for a community that provides a minimum of constraint of each individual on each of the others. The answer to this question is that each is to have as much freedom as is consistent with the freedom of everyone else. This implies an equality of constraint, that is, each person’s freedom is constrained by that of all the others. Or stated positively, as has been done above: you can do whatever you want as long as you do not harm another, another’s property, or another’s freedom of choice and action. Yet this is precisely what is violated by the unequal distribution of wealth and power. Moving from the last point back to the first, inequality of wealth and power means a.) that the freedom of choice and action of one class is not only greater than that of the others but that it also severely limits the freedom of choice and action of the others. The wealthy can influence economic and political policy in ways that benefit them and constrain the middle class and poor. The wealthy can influence economic and political policy in ways the middle class and poor cannot. This obviously violates the principle of equality of constraint, for the wealthy constrain the middle class and poor far more than vice versa. Greater equality of income and wealth, and therefore greater equality of power, would undoubtedly mean
greater freedom of choice for the vast majority of the population. The inequality of wealth and power (the lack of mutual constraint, particularly in the economic and political process) also puts the wealthy in the position to harm the property values of others, for, generally speaking, their disproportionate control of economic policy favors their own property values often at the expense of others. And finally, the inequality of wealth and power brings direct harm to the middle class and poor in the form of unequal access to and control over physical and mental health care, retirement programs, legal advice, etc. This liberal principle of “do whatever you wish as long as you do not harm another, another’s property, or another’s freedom of choice or action” is thus violated on each count.

Moreover, the idea that economic benefits to the wealthy (in the form of tax breaks) will “trickle down” to the middle class and poor has proven to be patently false. The gap between the wealthy, on the one hand, and the middle class and poor, on the other, got dramatically wider under such programs in the 1980s. In 1991 U.S. News and World Report indicates that “the share of the nation’s wealth held by the richest 10 percent climbed from 67.5 percent to 73.1 percent between 1979 and 1988” and that “the ratio of CEO’s income to that of an average worker was 12 to 1 in 1960; in 1988, it was 93 to 1.” (U.S. News and World Report, November 18, 1991, p. 35) Commenting on similar trends a major metropolitan newspaper reports the following decline of middle class income over the twenty year period from 1973 to 1993. Those households earning below $25,000 grew from 39% in 1973 to 40.3% in 1993. Those earning $25,000 to $75,000 fell from 52.7% in 1973 to 47.1% in 1993. And those earning above $75,000 increased from 8.2% in 1973 to 12.5% in 1993. (The Columbus Dispatch, Columbus, Ohio, October 18, 1995, Section B, p. 1) More recently, Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson also draw our attention to these same trends. They report that “the richest 1 percent’s share of national income (including capital gains)” went from approximately 9% in 1976 to approximately 24% by 2007 and that “the average after-tax income of the richest 1 percent of households rose from $337,100 a year in 1979 to more than $1.2 million in 2006—an increase of nearly 260 percent. Put another way, the average income of the
top 1 percent more than tripled in just over a quarter-century.” Moreover, Hacker and Pierson confirm that these changes and the dramatically widened gap between the wealthy and the middle/poor classes were brought about primarily by changes in the tax structure. (Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, Winner-Take-All Politics, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010, 18, 22-23, 38-39, 47-51.) This suggests, of course, that the gap can now be narrowed by returning to these tax structures, this time to favor the middle class and poor. Not only will this make economic distribution more equitable and fair, but there is at least some evidence to suggest that overall economic growth increases during periods of lower inequality. (Edward Wolff, “How the Pie is Sliced: America’s Growing Concentration of Wealth” in American Prospect, Summer 1995, 62-63) More recently, The New York Times writes that a nonpartisan report provided by the Congressional Research Service “found no correlation between top tax rates and economic growth, a central tenet of conservative economic theory…” Unfortunately, this report has been withdrawn at the request of Senate Republicans. (Jonathan Weisman, “Nonpartisan Tax Report Withdrawn After G.O.P. Protest”, The New York Times, November 1, 2012.) And finally, it must be stated that, since the economic system as a whole produces a nation’s wealth, it is unjustifiable for some members of the system to receive benefits far exceeding those rewarded to any of the others.

The main point I wish to make here is that under current class and economic conditions the liberal principle of “do what you what as long as you do not harm another, another’s property or another’s freedom of choice or action” is dramatically violated. The freedom of choice and action of one class far outweighs that of others and begins to harm and severely limit the freedom of choice and action of the others. The principle of the mutuality of constraint has thus given over to the practice of the constraint of most by the very few.

The current class and economic stratification also undermines both the principle of equality under the law, for the poor (and even the middle class) do not have the access to the legal system or to the legislative process that the rich do, and the principle of equality of opportunity, for dramatically different economic conditions create dramatically different enabling conditions.
Opportunity in a capitalist society has sometimes been compared to a race, say a 100 yard dash, in which all can run toward the victory line of financial reward. Equality of opportunity is here revealed as an open invitation to run the race and as the same 100 yards run by all. Yet, as others have pointed out, the analogy would be more accurate if we visualize many of the runners, the middle class and poor, with 50 to 100 pound sandbags on their backs and some runners, the wealthy, carrying nothing at all. A less fantastic, more realistic vision reveals nonetheless the same stark inequality of opportunity in U.S. society. Jonathon Kozol informs us that many inner city school systems spend approximately $4,000-$5,000 per student per year, while many of the wealthier suburban school districts spend twice that amount, approximately $10,000-$12,000 per student per year. (*Savage Inequalities: Children in American Schools*, New York: Crown, 1991, pp. 83ff, 236-237) If this is multiplied by the average number of students in a class, say twenty-five, then the difference in spending is approximately $125,000 per classroom per year. It does not take much vision to see, with such dramatically different enabling conditions, who will succeed in the system, who will “win the race.” Indeed, this is far from equality of opportunity.

Third and finally, the current class and economic stratification undermines the principle of identification with the community which is so important to the maintenance of the values of the community, for so many people in the middle and poor classes (the vast majority of the population) feel they have little or no influence over the community’s economic and political forces, the forces that so powerfully impact upon their lives. If people are to value and identify with the community, then they must have meaningful and equal access to it. And this access must not be only an empty formal equality of opportunity. It must be based upon an actual equality of enabling conditions. If we want people to value and identify with the community, then they must have real access to and democratic control over the economic and political institutions that so impact upon their lives. The current class and economic stratification largely prevents this access and denies broader democratic control.
The main purpose of this section has been to show that our current class and economic stratification undermines, first, democracy (one person/one vote), second, liberal principles (do what you want as long as you do not harm another, another’s property, or another freedom; equality under the law; equality of opportunity), and third, identification with the community. The case has been made here with respect to class structures within the U.S. can be made even more strongly with respect to class structures in the world economy. As is well known, Immanuel Wallerstein, followed by Daniel Chirot, advanced the thesis that the industrialized economies of Europe and North America put them in the position of the “upper class” relative to the rest of the world and put them in the position to control much of the world’s economy. The developing economies of the third world now primarily act as a “lower class,” supplying mostly cheap labor and raw materials. Their economies tend to be forced into exporting a few cash crops, often benefiting large farms and displacing small, self-sufficient local farm economies, or exporting raw materials, often benefiting a few owners of one industry but creating limited job opportunities for the great majority of the population. (Gelles and Levine, *Sociology*, pp. 304-308)

What is perceived as the disruptive action of the West is here very likely to incur resentment and perhaps even violence. And while the West extols the virtues of democracy and the freedom of the market place, for those in the third world that are displaced from their economy and community these virtues often sound empty and do not match the reality of their real life conditions. Thus, at both the national and international level the appeal to Western principles often does not match its practice.

What I have attempted to do thus far in this essay is apply some of Merleau-Ponty’s insights to contemporary events and practices. Merleau-Ponty’s two political treatises clearly warn us of the dangers of economic stratification and its negative influence on the democratic process. I have tried to demonstrate this with an appeal to Domhoff’s work and an observation of current socio-economic relationships and events. In closing I shall now return to Merleau-Ponty political ideas to offer a final discussion of his new community based liberalism.
Critics of liberalism are right to claim that there is no individual prior to community who naturally possesses certain inalienable rights, that rights are established by individuals within communities, and that these rights remain subject to re-evaluation by both current and future generations. Yet abandoning the claim that Western liberal values are established prior to community does not necessarily mean that we should abandon these values. The minimalist liberal notion of moral good (i.e., allow each citizen to choose for him or herself as long as no harm is brought to another) can be argued for in other ways. This, in fact, is what Merleau-Ponty has done. Merleau-Ponty’s notion of a “new liberalism” argues that the liberal notions of personal autonomy, moral good, and even of rationality must themselves be seen as community and history based and bound. (See above.) The self, moral values, and rational agreement form in social interaction, and only form within the context of certain social and political institutions. If we therefore wish to maintain liberalism’s values of democracy and individual conscience, then we owe allegiance to the community and political institutions that maintain them. If we wish to maintain individual conscience and a healthy sense of autonomy, this ironically will require a great deal of community support—certainly for children, but for adults as well. If we want children to grow into psychologically healthy and relatively autonomous adults, we will need to provide them with the proper community support, with love and care, and with quality training and educational programs. (Currently we are not doing this, at least for the poor and perhaps even for the middle class. Jonathon Kozol’s figures, cited above, reveal the dramatic inequality of educational expenditures in the U.S. His *Savage Inequalities* makes a convincing case that many children in the U.S. are not getting the training and education they will need to function effectively in our society. In addition, compared to other nations, when it comes to “people skills,” the U.S. lags far behind. *The World Competitiveness Yearbook 2001* lists the U.S. as first in the world in economic strength, while ranking it 8th in public spending on education and 24th on the educational system meeting the needs of a competitive economy.)
Furthermore, if we want adults to maintain a healthy level of autonomy, we will have to provide them with the proper community support, especially in times of crisis, such as a medical crisis, the loss of a job, or the loss of a significant other. The community will have to provide them with quality medical care, retraining programs and even emotional support. (Currently, we are not doing this very well. Quality health care often remains out of reach for many, if not most, Americans; the cost of retraining is borne by individuals when they are least capable of it; and individuals suffer through psychological difficulties, if they are lucky, with a little help from families and friends.) Maintaining liberal values and a degree of personal autonomy is something that can occur only within the context of certain social and political institutions. If this context is removed, as Merleau-Ponty reminds us that it was in France during the German occupation of the 1940’s, then the values are removed. If the institutions that help form this context are not supported and maintained by the individuals within them, then these institutions and the values they support are not likely to be maintained.

Merleau-Ponty would thus agree with the critics who claim that there is no self apart from the community and its history, as “old liberalism” has often maintained, and that the West needs to renew its sense of community. Yet Merleau-Ponty hopes to establish this community by respecting the rights of each individual. We must listen to all voices, try to move toward shared values, and support the community institutions that allow us to do so. This is consistent with liberalism’s original goal of trying to find a principle for community that does not violate the rights of the individual, since it respects the rights of each. Yet it does not rely upon traditional liberalism’s appeal to an isolated individual, as we have just seen, nor upon its appeal to a pre-established, ahistorical rationality, as we have seen earlier. For Merleau-Ponty, the way to establish unity and community is to articulate the relationships that already exist between cultures, groups, and individuals—this is, to express points of contact and similarities as a lateral or oblique universal. For Merleau-Ponty we must start this pursuit of shared truths and values.
with the individual’s concrete, lived through bodily perception of the world and its particular objects and events. The perceiver must then reflect on this experience, compare it to other experiences and to that which is experienced by others in order to move toward shared and stable meanings. Human beings will tend to have similar experiences because they have similar bodies with similar needs, because they are members of the same species, and because their experiences open out unto a common world. Yet, even through human beings are similar, they also reveal a degree of individuality in their thinking, their behavior, and even in their biology, since no two people are exactly the same. Thus, out of the shared world upon which the individual’s experience opens, there is a degree of individuation and separation. This kind of epistemology and social ontology leads naturally to a community based liberal policy: we must listen to the voice of each relatively individuated and engaged adult, check each voice against that of the others, and try to move toward the shared values that rest upon our similar but not quite identical experiences.

To summarize, then, Merleau-Ponty’s position is preferable to traditional liberalism because it does not assume an untenable pre-established rationality upon which to base its values, or a pre-established individual fully possessing certain rights, or that there is no gap between liberal principles and the actual practice of liberal societies. Within Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy the possibility of shared values and beliefs is based on the lived body, on the lived experiences and needs shared by members of the same species, and on an open ended, non-coercive dialogue by equals attempting to give expression to these experiences and needs. Also, for Merleau-Ponty, individuals and their rights are formed only in social interaction and only within the context of certain social and political institutions. Therefore, if we wish to maintain a degree of individuality and individual rights, we owe allegiance to the community institutions that bring them into existence and support them. And finally, for Merleau-Ponty, liberal values remain to be more fully established in actual concrete relationships, and they will be established only when the society actually takes equal account of all voices, that is, when society provides more equitable
access to the economy and to the economic and political policy decisions that so impact upon people’s lives.

Merleau-Ponty’s position remains relevant today because it seeks to establish community values by respecting each person’s conscience, by respecting and supporting the political and social institutions that support each individual equally and substantially (not just formally), and by attempting to move toward shared values—values that do not violate basic (minimalist or universalist) rights, values that can hopefully be confirmed by all and that remain to be confirmed by each.

**Bibliography**


*The Columbus Dispatch*. Columbus, Ohio, October 18, 1995.


