

Thinking politically with Merleau-Ponty

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Merleau-Ponty's fertile and provocative approach to philosophy was abruptly terminated by his death in 1961. Paul Ricoeur's judgement that he was the greatest of the French phenomenologists¹ has frequently been cited since then, yet a second demise occurred during the 1960s: this time at the hands of phenomenology's structuralist and poststructuralist critics. Although their targets were more explicitly Husserl and Sartre, Merleau-Ponty was also implicated in an approach now condemned for the triple sins of idealism, subjectivism and humanism.² The purpose of this article is to reappraise Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. His own way of criticizing and negotiating the unpopular triad now associated with it will become evident during the course of the discussion but the main focus will be on the relationship between phenomenology and politics in his work. For while his sympathy for some structuralist themes and his anticipation of certain post-structuralist ideas has often been noted, my contention will be that it was through his enduring commitment to a phenomenological style of thinking that he was able to sustain the sort of critical engagement with politics that has eluded his successors.

The contemporary reader's initial response on opening Merleau-Ponty's explicitly political writings is nevertheless likely to be that they look more anachronistic than timely. As a practitioner of phenomenology, he was committed to making sense of the appearing of the world around him. This included its political dimensions, where he discerned an enduring if hazardous struggle for peaceful coexistence within the violence and contingency of collective life. But it is an irony of this approach, with its aim of identifying and reinforcing progressive trajectories within the ambiguities of a dense intersubjective lifeworld, that the everyday and concrete interventions it summoned seem now to hold little more than historical interest. For Merleau-Ponty's concerns were typically those of the immediately

postwar generation of European radicals – Stalinism, the Cold War, decolonization and the ambiguities of liberal-democratic regimes – and he subjected them to often detailed, sometimes popular, analysis. It is, however, the way of interpreting events, and the commitment to do so that his phenomenology invited, that might still excite our interest. For, as I will argue, it offered Merleau-Ponty a method for making sense of the field of power relations that constitutes everyday politics as well as a justification for making normative judgements and critical interventions – activities his successors have tended to view as incompatible with post-foundationalist, post-humanist, post-representational philosophy.

Thinking phenomenologically

Merleau-Ponty's engagement with the work of the phenomenological movement's founder was a lifelong project, and a number of points about the political context in which he came to Husserl are germane. Husserl's commitment to returning to the things themselves suggested a route back to experience. This was especially welcome to thinkers like Merleau-Ponty and Sartre, who were frustrated that the abstractions of the prevailing Kantianism in France had proven of little relevance in confronting the traumatic events of the war and its aftermath. This had provided little scope for a study of the world itself as a source of meaning and this was what Merleau-Ponty hoped to gain from Husserl. Even reading Husserl's work was, however, fraught with political difficulties. Not only was most of it still untranslated and unpublished, existing largely as a great mass of shorthand and long-hand pages that Husserl's followers would gradually transcribe after his death, but the Jewish philosopher had his work banned, even destroyed, once the Nazis came to power. While many of his manuscripts did eventually find their way to Louvain in Belgium, where an archive was established, access was then

determined by political events in a very direct way as the shifting geography of the Occupation in Europe precluded free travel across borders. Merleau-Ponty was in fact the first foreign scholar to visit the archives, in 1939. Thereafter he gained only piecemeal and sporadic access to Husserl's writings, and confessed that without a project of translation and publication his thought would remain more a style of thinking than a philosophy.³ The unsystematic way in which Merleau-Ponty gained access to Husserl's work, which nevertheless placed him in a privileged position as its interlocutor, together with Husserl's own proclivity for presenting himself as a perpetual beginner, invited an ongoing reinterpretation of a thinking in progress rather than fidelity to a master. Merleau-Ponty always maintained that phenomenology remains more a style of approaching the world than a set of rigid formulae. He ascribed the status of phenomenologist *avant la lettre* to thinkers like Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx and Freud as well as to artists and writers like Cézanne and Proust since they, like Husserl, had suspended conventional understandings about existence to explore afresh the way meaning emerges there.⁴

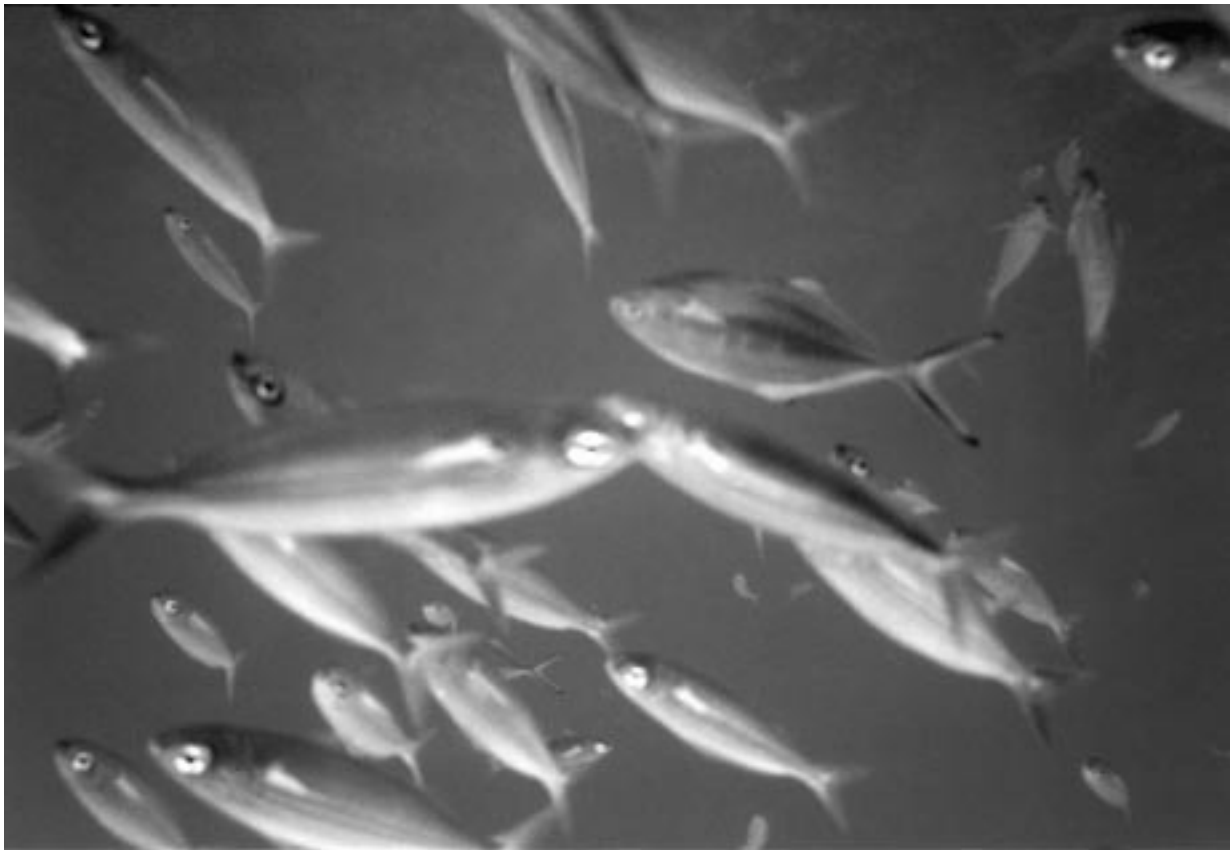
The main effect of Merleau-Ponty's creative interpretation of Husserl would be to push phenomenology in a more existentialist, materialist and political direction. For despite its appeal to experience, Husserl's own work, especially in its earlier forms, retained a distinctly Cartesian orientation. In appealing to the things themselves it was concerned with the way they appear to consciousness, with phenomenology being presented as a rigorous science of this consciousness. Husserl often spoke as if Descartes and Kant had merely been insufficiently radical in thinking through subjectivity. By suspending naturalistic assumptions and theoretical presuppositions about experience, as well as psychological explanations of consciousness, he now intended to discover the inner core of subjectivity in its meaning-bestowing acts. He thus spoke of a transcendental phenomenology that would describe the intentional structures and essences of a purified transcendental ego. In doing so, he relied upon a notion of intuition whose privileged mode was that of perception. As Levinas summarized it in 1930 (focusing primarily on *Ideas I*), 'in intuition we relate directly to the object, we reach it. But Levinas also noted his concern that even the perceptual act seemed for Husserl to suggest the presence of intuitive contents in the mind rather than real objects, with consciousness thus remaining representational and the retrieval of the things themselves, a theoretical act. Under Heidegger's influence, he asked whether the world is not rather

'presented in its very being as a centre of action, as a field of activity or of *care*.'⁵

Merleau-Ponty was similarly determined to wrest phenomenology away from idealism. Here he deployed a number of strategies. First, his reading was consistently inflected through what, from the perspective of the late 1950s, he would define as the two essential philosophical themes of the twentieth century: existence and dialectics.⁶ From the beginning, he identified phenomenology as a philosophy of existence. In an early essay, Merleau-Ponty had summarized existentialism's key question as 'that of man's relationship to his natural or social surroundings.'⁷ Existence here expressed a phenomenal milieu rather than the objective realm of things or a subjective domain of consciousness. To exist means to live as an embodied, intersubjective, expressive being that subtends and discovers significance in all its acts; to be 'condemned to meaning'.

It is this level of lived experience that Merleau-Ponty then explores phenomenologically, struggling to think about it, with it, from within it. It is the irreducible interweaving (the 'chiasm' as he will later put it) of mind and body, subject and object that he finds in existence, that will eventually yield and be supported by a non-Cartesian ontology of the flesh, that 'emblem' of Being. The implications of a philosophy of existence were thus extremely radical for him, since it rejected the whole system of Cartesian dualisms that structure modern thought while posing the challenge of a thinking consonant with this rejection. This would amount to nothing less than a revision of reasoning and it is this task that Merleau-Ponty associates with phenomenology. The essential challenge here was no longer to reflect upon existence from outside, but to make sense of it from within: a commitment that would have significant implications for any interpretation of politico-historical events. Consistent with it is the critique of all dualist, representational epistemologies, whether idealist or realist, and of their accounts of the world.

In later years Merleau-Ponty would distinguish between his abiding commitment to this philosophy of existence and existentialism, a movement he now identified as flourishing in the 1930s. He had always in fact expressed his disagreement with its main exponent, Sartre, whose work he still found too Cartesian in its reliance upon the thinking subject (the *pour-soi* of *Being and Nothingness*). But he would subsequently lament the decline of Sartrean existentialism as a *political* project, noting that attention had shifted to Heidegger, whose philosophy is 'not a thought directly



in contact with everyday events'.⁸ It is this contact that is absolutely central to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and that renders it thoroughly political. For while he followed Heidegger in rendering the subject a being-in-the-world, he noted the latter's failure to bring philosophy itself into the sphere of facticity.⁹ This is why his oeuvre includes radio and magazine interviews, newspaper and journal articles, where he ruminated on the meaning and direction (*sens*) of current affairs.

A further strand of thinking exonerated from the dualism rejected by a philosophy of existence was dialectics. In fact, Merleau-Ponty would eventually conclude that Hegel and Marx had succumbed to such dualism since, despite their exemplary attempts to grasp the dialectical unfolding of existence historically, they lacked fidelity to the implications of their approach. During the 1940s, however, historical materialism was presented as more or less synonymous with phenomenology and existentialism, and much of the methodology attributed to it then would be retained later under the title of a hyperdialectic. For in practising the reciprocity between subject and object, in recognizing the necessary back-and-forth between conceptual and material development, dialectical thinking emulated the structure of existence that Merleau-Ponty's return to the things themselves was describing. 'This concrete thinking, which Marx calls "critique"

he insisted, 'is what others propound under the name of "existential philosophy"'.¹⁰ Hegel, read from this perspective, was also presented as an existentialist, a sort of over-abstract Marxist,¹¹ allowing Merleau-Ponty to note an affinity between the phenomenologies of the young Hegel and the mature Husserl, who were both credited with tracing the genesis of a contingent historical rationality.¹²

If phenomenology attributed primacy to perception and thereby privileged the body as the origin and bearer of meaning, it was from Marx that Merleau-Ponty learnt that bodies are always caught within socioeconomic, historical contexts. Here their capacities to enrich and develop shared meanings are caught in power relations, while progress in engendering rational forms must be measured against concrete indices that extend beyond the formal rights of citizenship. This is why an engaged philosophy must entail a detailed reading of events and their trajectories, one guided by phenomenological principles. The purpose of its interrogation is ultimately to influence the course of events in a 'progressive' direction. Phenomenology would then be led in exactly the non-idealist, anti-Kantian direction that Merleau-Ponty's own political experience called for.

Merleau-Ponty also countermanded Husserl's idealism by invoking a merely latent, 'unthought-of element' of his thinking. The Preface to the *Phenomenology of*

Perception, where he offered the clearest account of his phenomenological approach, is structured by an apparent ambiguity between the latter's idealist and existentialist orientations. Yet if a tension remains between them, this is presented as a consequence of the real difficulty such an approach faces when 'all its efforts are concentrated on re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world'.¹³ Recognizing the impossibility of philosophical coincidence with this mute world (refusing the crime of which poststructuralists accuse Hegel, of reducing all otherness to reason), phenomenology is 'an ever-renewed experiment in making its own beginning'.¹⁴ Far from taking intellectual possession of the lived, the phenomenologist struggles to invoke its hidden dimensions: the rich, excessive residue that nourishes all idealizations yet always outruns them. As such, phenomenology is an invitation to an ongoing interpretation of and participation within the dialectics of existence.

It is precisely this attempt at reading experience from within that Merleau-Ponty will undertake in the political domain, with its attendant project of discerning rational themes as they unfold within the ambiguities of coexistence. It is important in this context to recognise that he was not (as recent feminist critics in particular have claimed¹⁵) advocating a return to experience in some naïve and uncritical sense. It is precisely because experience is structured by accumulated meanings that become reified, saturated with habit and inertia and, in collective life, interwoven with power and obfuscation, that it must be ceaselessly interrogated, opened up to new adventures and experiments. Indeed it is this opening, with its renewed opportunities for communicative enrichment and freedom, that Merleau-Ponty associates with an exemplary politics and with progress, both political and philosophical.

Political enquiry is supported here by the phenomenological description of a precognitive domain of brute Being which is not alien since we experience it corporeally and which is not hostile to reason since an 'operative rationality' associated first with the body is already at work there. For perception already introduces patterns, dimensions, a modulation or style into the world, thereby insinuating significance at the level of embodiment. Such is the originary perceptual *Gestalt* (form): 'To be conscious = to have a figure on a ground – one cannot go back any further.'¹⁶ Such is the difference between the sort of inert natural world that Cartesians and Kantians describe and the phenomenal realm of existence ('the world as cradle of meanings', the 'native abode of all rationality'¹⁷).

It is why the knowing subject, as a situated, incarnate consciousness, cannot legitimately survey or constitute the world's sense from outside but must plunge into it.

Despite a shared project of destabilizing conventional meanings, this is also where Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology differs from its various poststructuralist and deconstructionist successors. Existence (*qua* pre-discursive) is not for it an other whose heterogeneity defies reason because it is a resolutely other scene, but a milieu wherein sense and non-sense are intimately interwoven. This allows the phenomenologist both to discern rational, if pre-cognitive, trajectories there, and to insist on the irreducible ambiguity, the opacity, that lines even the most apparently rational thought or object. There is a dialectic rather than discontinuity between the visible and the invisible, the actual and the virtual. Phenomenology is not, then, a foundationalist philosophy, but it does find a grounding for meaning in (albeit shifting and inexhaustible) bodily experience, rather than propelling meaning into the vertigo of sheer difference. Far from seeking to reduce the lived to identity, however, it endeavours to suspend those rationalist theories that *impose* a reified logic on things rather than allowing existence to manifest itself in its complex appearing. Thus philosophy 'does not seek a verbal substitute for the world we see.... It is the things themselves, from the depths of their silence, that it wishes to bring to expression.'¹⁸ Merleau-Ponty speaks in this context of a matter that is 'pregnant with its form'; an ontogenesis that is not comprehended by intellectual immanence but apprehended 'by coexistence, laterally, *by the style*'.¹⁹ As the ontology of this fleshy becoming is refined, so the dialectic becomes more intimate and reversible: 'the seer and the seen reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen.'²⁰

The impossibility of replicating existence in thought is not philosophy's failure but its fecundity. It is through its creative interpretations that it lays down Being and thereby demonstrates, now on a more self-reflexive level, how reason is brought into the world through a process of critical-creative engagement. Ontologically, it is the spacing, the interval, between the two leaves of the body as touching and touched that allows for a folding, a non-coincidence, within Being and thereby introduces reflexivity, a negativity, into the opacity of the in-itself. Philosophically, it is phenomenology that practises this fleet reversibility between meaning and matter (where the terms subject and object will eventually become too clumsy and reified) on a more symbolic level, revealing performatively the very

metabolism of existence, the choreography of reason, which will finally be defined as a 'hyperdialectics'. A possible disjunction between the lived and the spoken is bridged here by Merleau-Ponty's account of language as enjoying, beyond its manifest meaning, a latent, existential significance that is also conveyed and apprehended by its style ('language in forming itself expresses, at least laterally, an ontogenesis of which it is a part.'²¹).

A hyperdialectical approach will be the one appropriate to the more Heideggerian, anti-humanist ontology of the last writings. But it is also notable that Merleau-Ponty was already crediting both the young Marx and the mature Husserl with fidelity to this ontology. Thus the *1844 Manuscripts* are glossed as 'a dialectic that will no longer be a history of consciousness, not even a history of man (Feuerbach), but a "history of Being"' where 'nature, man, and history are all understood ... as movements without a locatable discontinuity, where the other is always involved. – There is no cleavage between matter and idea, object and subject, nature and man, ... but a single Being where negativity works' and history is 'the flesh of man.'²² Marx had only failed to develop the auto-critical dialectical method that was its necessary corollary. Husserl is similarly praised for awakening 'a wild-flowering world and mind'; a 'jointing and framing of Being'. Merleau-Ponty cites the later Husserl's cryptic allusion to a 'third dimension'²³ where his thinking was allegedly 'as much attracted by the haecceity of Nature as by the vortex of consciousness'.²⁴ It was in Husserl's *The Crisis of the European Sciences* (composed 1934–39) in particular that Merleau-Ponty saw evidence of these developments. His emphasis on this work comprises a third dimension of his attempts at expunging phenomenology's idealism, by focusing on this most existentialist of Husserl's writings and pursuing further the unspoken logic he discerned there. For Husserl, like Marx, had failed to pursue the implications of his insights far enough and it is here that Merleau-Ponty locates his own efforts at taking phenomenology further into that pre-theoretical realm which is our 'archaeology'. What I want nevertheless to bring out in a brief consideration of Husserl's *Crisis* is how radical and experimental, how politically resonant, the phenomenological project had become by this stage.

Reading the crisis

The crisis to which Husserl's title refers concerns the modern sciences but also turns out to involve a broader European crisis, one of modernity as such. It was, of course, no accident that he was writing under

the gathering clouds of fascism, but its irrationalism is only a symptom of the broader irrationalism that a surfeit of rationalism has paradoxically brought about. For the central problem Husserl identifies is the determinist, positivist form assumed by modern knowledge, the hegemony of scientific thinking now extending to the human sciences and even to philosophy *qua* logical positivism. The outcome is a loss of normativity and of other, acausal, ways of thinking which a more reflective philosophy once practised when it considered the contribution of knowledge to the human condition. The crisis of modernity, then, entails a loss of meaning as attention to the merely factual drives out existential, ethical, political, questions. The symptoms identified resemble the kind of malaise Nietzsche had associated with nihilism and that many would today associate with postmodernism. Husserl describes the scepticism and disorientation that follow from the rationalist corrosion of normative validity claims and speaks of 'the total meaninglessness' of European humanity's 'cultural life, its total "existenz."²⁵

A historical enquiry into the origins of the scientific way of thinking and the reasons for its becoming both hegemonic and narrow must then be undertaken. As Merleau-Ponty points out, Husserl's phenomenology at this point takes a novel turn, becoming genetic rather than transcendental inasmuch as meaning is now studied genealogically rather than as static essences. Husserl also identifies a novel turn among his own predecessors. It was with Galileo that nature had begun to appear as a mathematical manifold. He alerts readers to the strangeness and novelty of this way of thinking: here was the unprecedented idea that everything which manifests itself as empirically real through sense-qualities must have its mathematical index. For science the account was extremely efficacious, but some 'were misled into taking these formulae and their formula-meaning for the true nature of being itself'.²⁶ Thus Husserl finds not just the development of a useful intellectual tool but a whole shift in the framework of meaning, with 'the surreptitious substitution of the mathematically structured world of idealities for the only real world, the one that is actually given through perception' – that is, the 'everyday lifeworld'.²⁷ The kind of intentional, pre-thetic knowing which was first denigrated by the Greeks as mere *doxa* would now be covered up more definitely by the idealized substitutions of modern science and Cartesian ontology. The subject that is severed from the *res extensa* is also reduced to a mere effect of its causal determinants, most typically in psychology.

This disenchantment and the rendering of subjects as objects is, of course, the logic of enlightenment that Adorno and Horkheimer would develop and politicize so effectively in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It is why, despite his rejection of classical accounts of the subject, Husserl is unwilling to abandon the realm of subjectivity itself. The challenge he sets for phenomenology is to return to the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) in order to understand how reason and subjectivity first appear there, so that a non-positivist dimension of reasoning might be restored. Thus the major tasks Husserl sets for the philosopher are first, to offer a thoroughgoing critique of modern rationalism, eschewing the ‘bad’, ‘lazy’, ‘narrow-minded’ reasoning of the dominant positivism without succumbing to the irrationalism he associated with existentialists like Heidegger, and second to practise a new kind of phenomenological reasoning that alone might rescue modernity from its crisis. (Again, this project of renewing rationality is also typical of critical theory, with (negative) dialectics or communicative action substituting for phenomenology there.)

Husserl’s ambitions for this new reasoning could hardly have been expressed in more effusive terms. He speaks of the initiation of a ‘new age’, confident in its idea of philosophy and its methods and able to overcome scepticism by the ‘radicalism of its new beginning’. Phenomenology is vital in bringing latent reason to a self-understanding of its suppressed possibilities, since a ‘rational civilization’ would be one where reason guided human becoming. Husserl thus grants the philosopher a central role in the task of cultural and political renewal, referring to him as a ‘functionary of mankind’. He speaks of a personal transformation comparable to a religious conversion, whose broader significance is ‘the greatest existential transformation’ ever offered to humanity.²⁸ By putting positivism into historical context and thereby relativizing it, phenomenological reasoning will be able to facilitate, he claims, a ‘complete reorientation of view’ that opens ‘new dimensions’, novel questions, as it pursues an urgent practical task. Such an enquiry will exercise a necessarily critical function inasmuch as it reveals the *naïveté* of objectivist thought and the historical prejudices which arise from the obscurities of traditional thinking.²⁹

The success of this task lies in the phenomenologist’s ability to return to the lifeworld. Since knowledge has always developed by covering over this realm, none of the existing concepts or ways of thinking can, however, be utilized and thus phenomenology is confronted with a formidable challenge. The lifeworld

has only previously been experienced as self-evident, never grasped theoretically: ‘There has never been a scientific inquiry into the way in which the lifeworld constantly functions as subsoil’, Husserl contends. ‘We are absolute beginners, here, and have nothing in the way of a logic designed to provide norms; we can do nothing but reflect’, open to the ‘essential strangeness and precariousness’ of the ideas involved while avoiding all prejudice and ‘alien influences’. The lifeworld is defined here as the domain of ‘prescientifically intuited nature’, the ‘intuitive surrounding world of life’ that is experienced as pre-given and common for everyone as the horizon of quotidian practices.³⁰

This is where Husserl invokes the ‘third’ dimension to which Merleau-Ponty refers: returning to the lifeworld means rethinking the nature of subjectivity and this can no longer mean the abstract, transcendental ego of his own earlier work (or of Descartes or Kant) but a subject that, immersed in existence, is thoroughly corporeal, intersubjective and historical. As Merleau-Ponty summarizes it, transcendental subjectivity becomes an intersubjectivity.³¹ Yet how can one think from this perspective? The radicalism of Merleau-Ponty’s response to this challenge can be glimpsed by exploring the way he responded to some of the themes and challenges the later Husserl had presented.

From rationalism to hyperdialectics

First, Merleau-Ponty shares Husserl’s judgement that modernity is suffering a crisis for which its rationalism is broadly to blame, although he understands this in more general (co)existential terms. For it structures a whole mode of being-in-the-world, one predicated on knowledge and action (or, as the critical theorists might more graphically have put it, on the domination of nature) and comprises the horizon or style of the modern lifeworld. In particular, Merleau-Ponty identifies a close affinity here between Cartesian ontology, modern epistemologies and political regimes, all of which share the same dualist structure. The ontological split between subject and object means that a process of interrogation and learning from within existence is foreclosed. The political crisis of contemporary life is broadly twofold: its rationalist regimes remain existentially violent and hierarchical, thus failing to realize their own ideals, while rationalism’s failure to grasp the dialectics of collective life condemns potentially progressive political action to irrational impotence. In terms of the ideological foes that populated Merleau-Ponty’s cold world, he saw two equally rationalist and inefficacious projects at work. Dominated by their

Kantian principles, liberals succumb to mere moral posturing and formal analysis; their desire for clean hands and faith in goodwill prevents them from entering the messy, contingent milieu of collective life, a field of forces where strategy as well as ethics comes into play. Under these conditions, even good intentions lack efficacy and by default condone the violence that capitalism and colonialism bring to social relations. This is why Merleau-Ponty bluntly concludes that



‘Machiavelli is worth more than Kant.’³² But Communists who renounce the sort of open dialectical interpretation Merleau-Ponty advocates and merely read off the justification and promise of their success from the laws of history fare no better. Their apparent realism is also but a rationalist project of the subject. Revolutionary violence becomes ineffectual and unjustifiable once it loses contact with the contingent logic of events. Where the ‘curse of politics is precisely that it must translate values into the order of facts’,³³ there is no grasp of the order of the political. It is reduced to the ethical or the determined (an entire critique of contemporary forms of political philosophy, political science and political practice is surely encapsulated here). In sum, modernity remains saturated with illusions that rational subjectivity can control nature and history, with an ethos of mastery rather than interrogation, and grounded in the duality of subject and object rather than their interweaving. This is why substituting an existential for a Cartesian ontology is a politically as well as a philosophically urgent task.

The next theme I want to take up accordingly concerns the return to ontology, where two political

dimensions assume importance. On the one hand, attention should be drawn to the political motivation that underlies Merleau-Ponty’s determination to develop the new ontology he never lived to complete, but whose anticipations are collected as *The Visible and the Invisible*. The first working note there begins: ‘Our state of non-philosophy – Never has the crisis been so radical.’ A brief summary of the misadventures of the dialectic yields the conclusion: ‘Necessity of a

return to ontology.’³⁴ What is this necessity? The fact that Marxism – whose dialectical reading of politics and whose philosophy of history had earlier seemed to promise a way of way of leading collective life in a progressive direction by drawing a phenomenological approach onto the terrain of coexistence – was now judged after all to rely on an ontology as dualist and humanist as that of its opponents. In the ideal of a non-alienated nature promulgated in the early writings, a positivity had been

expounded which did not ultimately allow Marxism to remain faithful to the contingency of history and the situatedness of negativity to which it ostensibly subscribed.³⁵ The Marxist critique would accordingly have to be ‘freed from any compromise with an absolute of the negation which, in the long run, is germinating new oppressions’. It does not, however, need to be abandoned, but ‘taken up again, re-exposed completely’. Otherwise, Marx is no better than Kant.³⁶ But this new exposition requires a more thorough excavation of the relationship between philosophy and non-philosophy and this will require a return to ontology, where the primordial relationship between meaning and material existence is grasped. In short, the existential crisis that besets modern political regimes cannot be tackled until their ontological foundations are thoroughly revised. Radical philosophy, revolutionary change, will only repeat their rationalist closures unless the relationship between subjective and objective factors is fundamentally challenged. As Husserl had already realized, this would imply a wholly new mode of reasoning and, ultimately, a novel mode of being-in-the-world, of coexisting. The opening of the new ontological work must be conceived, Merleau-Ponty noted to himself,

‘in a very direct, contemporary manner, like the *Crisis* of Husserl’.³⁷

On the other hand, the new description of Being as flesh looks politically resonant because Merleau-Ponty associates his reappraisal of the dialectic with an anti-humanist ontology. Only following his enquiry, he insists, might one ‘be able definitively to appraise humanism’. He must proceed, he had reminded himself in a final working note, ‘without any compromise with humanism.’³⁸ In light of the criticisms structuralist and poststructuralist anti-humanists would launch against dialectics, existentialism and phenomenology, it seems judicious to wonder how transformative Merleau-Ponty’s later thinking might have been for his own politics, which had formerly operated under a broadly humanist banner.

Although Merleau-Ponty was indeed critical now of his previous efforts as still too subjectivist, it nevertheless seems implausible to interpret this as an abandoning of his phenomenological commitments. The continued ruminations on Husserl and use of phenomenological terminology testify to this. From the beginning he had recognized the need to reappraise the status of the subject and it was only perhaps a matter of time before he found terms like the (tacit) *cogito*, subject, consciousness, mind, concepts, judgement, representation, too tainted by association with an ontological thinking substance. The terminology was now to be one of dimensions, hinges, levels, pivots, invoked as mere folds in the flesh of that self-generative Being which the philosopher struggles to speak. But corresponding to the rejection of a series of idealist philosophical figures connected with the subject, should we also anticipate the disappearance of their political corollaries? Would the political individuals and classes – the actors and agents who had populated Merleau-Ponty’s political landscape – now disappear? Would their ‘interiority’ – the values, hopes and fears that had contributed one pole of political experience, or the dilemmas of responsibility and commitment he had agonized over with them – now have been ruled irrelevant? Would the notion of historical progress and the normative evaluation of different styles of coexistence have become moribund? How, in short, might the choreography of political becoming and rational engagement now have been approached?

Certainly Merleau-Ponty, like the Husserl of the *Crisis*, had something radical in mind. The year before his death he pronounced: ‘Everything will have to begin from scratch, in politics as well as in philosophy.’³⁹ Yet, just as I suggested, the new ontology was a logical stage of development rather than a

rejection of the older project, so I do not think we are left now with an unimaginable political departure but merely a more rigorous way of approaching the political whose outlines are already apparent in the completed work. There are a number of factors that support this interpretation.

To begin with, the phenomenological project was consistently presented in terms of new beginnings: the task of returning to the things themselves and of questioning sedimented meanings was never complete. Moreover, the most obvious implication of the disappearance of those figures whose departure is hypothesized above is that Merleau-Ponty was moving towards a description of the anonymous, impersonal logic of structures that was by the late 1950s identifying structuralist anti-humanism. His sympathetic engagement with Saussure’s structural linguistics (itself now presented as convergent with Husserlian phenomenology⁴⁰) and Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology, as well as the ensuing debate as to whether Merleau-Ponty had himself become a structuralist, suggest this as a plausible inference. As critics noted, however, his structures still looked more like *Gestalten*, those dialectical unities of structural and expressive moments that were intended not to eliminate subjectivity but to bind it to the non-subjective. In other words structures, like *Gestalten* (and this latter term is still used frequently in *The Visible and the Invisible*), were useful dialectical concepts in the search for a non-Cartesian discourse, a means for grasping the relations between agency and structure, consciousness and system, values and facts, not a way of reducing the first to the second. Merleau-Ponty’s political agents had always operated as an intimate, complex mix of interiority and exteriority and it seems likely that he would now only have reconsidered this dense political flesh more thoroughly. The hyper-dialectical approach alluded to above sketches the kind of exemplary approach the later Merleau-Ponty considered appropriate to and efficacious within this density and he clearly hoped political actors and committed philosophers might yet influence the course of history by deploying it.

Furthermore, the anti-humanism that inspired Merleau-Ponty’s comments must surely, given their ontological context, have been Heidegger’s, whose most explicitly anti-humanist statements had arisen in response to Sartre’s continued reliance on the Cartesian *cogito*.⁴¹ It is not that subjectivity is now wholly constituted by (political, economic, linguistic, etc.) structures, then, but that its role in the becoming of reason has to be thought from a different, less

subject-centred perspective. 'Being and man belong to one another without the possibility of thinking their relationship only from man's point of view'.⁴² Against the natural, non-alienated Man of Marx in 1844, we find something more akin to *Dasein*: the 'visible has to be described as something that is realized through man, but which is nowise anthropology'.⁴³ At the same time, we should not forget Merleau-Ponty's critical comment regarding the apolitical nature of Heidegger's thinking. The social and historical contexts of these expressive artists of the flesh cannot be ignored. It seems to me unlikely that Merleau-Ponty was abandoning his broadly humanist ideals of peaceful coexistence here, having always associated these with the existentialist caveat that human identity is an entirely contingent matter that relied on self-invention. What he was now more doubtful about was the anthropology that oriented the Marxist philosophy of history and its criteria of progress, on which he had unwittingly drawn.

Finally, we know that as far as Being is concerned, the new descriptions meant thinking from the perspective of the flesh: a reflection that emulates its meaning/matter reciprocity, which for Merleau-Ponty had always been the challenge for phenomenology as it tried to think existence, with its subject/object interweaving, without reducing it to subjective categories. Dialectical thinking had always been presented as most appropriate to this ontology but the dialectic from Hegel to Sartre had eventually faltered here, causing a crisis in Merleau-Ponty's own approach. 'Between the thought or fixation of essences, which is the aerial view, and life, which is inherence in the world or vision, a divergence appears'.⁴⁴ Experience and concept, non-philosophy and philosophy, had after all fallen apart. But it is not gratuitous, given Merleau-Ponty's political motivations and his ambition to reappraise Marxism, that the reasoning he now commends is labelled a good or hyper dialectic:

What we call hyperdialectic is a thought that ... envisages without restriction the plurality of relationships and what has been called ambiguity ... conscious of the fact that every *thesis* is an idealization, that Being is not made up of idealizations or of things said, as the old logic believed, but of bound wholes where signification never is except in tendency.⁴⁵

Hyperdialectics is, then, the thinking appropriate to, a manifestation of, this signification 'in tendency', where it tries to sustain the ambiguities and lacunae of ideal meaning by replicating them within its own self-critical process. In interrogating the world,

Merleau-Ponty insists, it 'revives, repeats, or imitates' its crystallization before us, thereby disclosing 'how the world comes about.' Crucially, then, hyperdialectics avoids positioning the philosopher outside of the inexhaustible existence she tries to articulate, as an earlier dialectics had. 'Being neither an outside witness nor pure agent, it is implicated in the movement and does not view it from above'.⁴⁶

Husserl had claimed that a rational civilization is one where reason guides human becoming, but argued that reason first needed fundamental revision. Merleau-Ponty's broad agreement is the final theme from the *Crisis* I want to consider. The question is how phenomenological reasoning and hyperdialectics are to be practised in the political domain, that sphere of collective life that is the test for any resolution to modernity's crisis. What sort of methodology and intervention are being advocated here?

Phenomenology as political engagement

To begin with, one must reconceptualize the political. Just as phenomenology means suspending conventional theories in order to see how meaning emerges within existence, so the genealogy of collective life needs to be approached from the perspective of coexistence. Merleau-Ponty tells us that the philosopher's contribution to politics is critically to disclose the illusions of classical political thought and thence to inspire the creation of new cultural and political forms.⁴⁷ Perhaps he anticipated that replacing Cartesian ontology with a dialectics of the flesh might engender a novel mode of being-in-the-world predicated on a register of 'subject/object' relations unknown to modern rationalists (but glimpsed perhaps by the child, by some feminists and in the non-Western styles of coexistence that intrigued him). More immediately, where the prevailing liberalism is grounded in a philosophy of the subject, the radical challenge was to rethink the political in terms of *intersubjectivity*. This must entail something far more fundamental than placing rational individuals within a communicative situation: what is needed is an ontology of this interworld, in order to grasp the way rational forms are engendered within the thick, adverse space between subjects. The analysis of politics no longer begins with the juridico-theoretical model (as Foucault will call it), with the state at its zenith and juridical subjects beneath, but with struggles for coexistence. Merleau-Ponty notes the 'passional and illegal origins of all legality and reason'.⁴⁸

Just as actors are an indissoluble chiasm of mind and body, so one needs to appreciate the complex interplay of interiority and exteriority in their collective life. For politics 'oscillates between the world of

reality and that of values, between individual judgment and common action, between the present and the future.⁴⁹ Marx and Machiavelli are worth more than Kant because they understand that good intentions and humane values are worth nothing unless they are translated into concrete relations, and this translation requires an understanding of the type of terrain to be negotiated as well as the play of forces within which they must be inscribed: does 'not every action involve us in a game that we cannot entirely control?'⁵⁰ Like Foucault, Merleau-Ponty often then imagines the political as a game of strategy and describes it as a field of forces. The idea of a field came to him, however, from Gestalt psychology and had been used extensively in his perceptual studies, where he had spoken of 'the tensions which run like lines of force across the visual field and system: own body-world'.⁵¹ Collective history is then defined analogously as a dense field of acts and powers, crisscrossed by trajectories and invisible vectors wherein political agents are caught:

the spiritual atoms train after them their historical role and are tied to one another by the threads of their actions; what is more, they are blended with the totality of actions, whether or not deliberate, which they exert upon others and the world so that there exists not a plurality of subjects, but an intersubjectivity.⁵²

The realm of appearances described by Machiavelli is attributed a similar structure too, where acts of authority 'open or close hidden fissures in the block of general consent, and trigger a molecular process which may modify the whole course of events'.⁵³ Political virtuosity then entails an ability to negotiate this treacherous terrain in order to modify it. But it is surely with just this kind of overdetermined, complex field in mind that Merleau-Ponty would summon a hyperdialectical tracing of the manifold invisible, virtual relations that subtend every visible phenomenon, mindful that every interpretation, along with its own values, also enters the field of forces and may hasten its transformation. Hyperdialectics is, then, the thinking appropriate to an analysis of, and intervention within, collective life because it emulates its structure as a field of forces, where these forces are now permeated with power. It is the thinking appropriate to a rational politics in the act of self-invention (and politics is defined precisely as 'an action in the process of self-invention'⁵⁴). There is a whole phenomenological art to reading history, to tracing and inscribing rational vectors within its contingency, a practice that Merleau-Ponty variously associates in his political writings with historical mate-

rialism, 'Weberian phenomenology' and Machiavellian *virtù*. The difference between the political actor and the committed philosopher here is only a matter of distance and degree.

Where Merleau-Ponty differs from Foucault is that collective life is not *just* a matrix of shifting power relations, and he hopes it is more than a process of trial and error. In his earlier writings at least, he contends that overall it has meaning and direction (*sens*), since it is in politics that experiments in peaceful coexistence are undertaken. He suggests that there are 'certain effective problems present at the core of history' which revolve around questions of coexistence; a 'logic of human coexistence' that works through a sort of natural selection.⁵⁵ While new solutions to coexistence are an open, experimental question, and there is no simple linear development nor teleological guarantee, there is Merleau-Ponty believes a negative impetus whereby impoverishing or closed forms will tend to be eliminated as political actors run up against structures that oppress and limit them. It is indeed this same negativity that motivates the philosopher: 'In the crucible of events we become aware of what is not acceptable to us, and it is this experience as interpreted that becomes both thesis and philosophy.'⁵⁶ It is this philosophical intervention within the force field of politics that can support reason by clarifying the latent and equivocal meanings, the ambiguous trajectories, of the present, while reflecting on lessons available from the past. Yet it was clearly the loss of Marxist criteria for distinguishing between more or less rational trajectories and coexistential solutions that caused Merleau-Ponty such anguish. Was history after all composed only of dreams and adventures? Can an anti-humanist, non-anthropological normativity still be elicited from the later ontology that will justify and orient critical interventions? In fact, the studies of perception had always implied an immanent ethics of openness, since the freedom to ask and respond to more complex questions permits more sophisticated levels of (perceptual) meaning and hence enriched opportunities for adaptation, while truth is consistently associated by Merleau-Ponty with fecundity, the opening of a field to novel solutions. Closure means inertia and impoverishment, where negation when it occurs is more likely to take random, irrational, violent form. Critique as well as clarification are the philosopher's contributions to this process.

But by what method, finally, is the philosopher to disclose the meanings fomenting in collective life? In outlining the phenomenological method, Merleau-

Ponty often explains that ‘to understand is to take in the total intention’ of a phenomenon; that is, not just particular, visible facts or events but also, as he variously expresses it, the ‘ontological cipher’, ‘a certain way of patterning the world’, the ‘unique core of existential meaning’, that grants parts (culture, economy, state and so on) a common style, a mode of being-in-the-world. This was the approach he had applauded in Marx, as well as in the development of ideal types by a ‘Weberian phenomenology’, a ‘Weberian Marxism’,⁵⁷ and it is the one he had himself utilized in grasping the internal logic of rationalism. But it is already prefigured in the act of perception itself, where the latter means ‘to see, standing forth from a cluster of data, an immanent significance’.⁵⁸ Facts and their meaning can no more be severed than facts and values, so social science and philosophy must work in conjunction, the first to collect empirical data and the second to interpret its existential significance. Merleau-Ponty likens the latter aspect to scientific induction, provided this is recognized as an ‘illumination’ of phenomena rather than a mechanical operation.⁵⁹ But he more commonly likens it to an artistic process of stylization, where the forging and interpreting of historical forms similarly manifest an ‘advent of meaning’. The phenomenologist who reconstructs these lived meanings from the ambiguities of collective life is not therefore locked in gratuitous imaginings and relativism; nor is she aiming for a true representation. Rather, she composes them, ‘as an experienced pianist deciphers an unknown piece of music’ through communicating with its mode of being.⁶⁰

In politics, this kind of interpretive work begins with a feeling for one’s times, their lacunae and possibilities. It plays a demystifying role because it evaluates societies not in terms of their formal claims but on the basis of their lived relations. As Merleau-Ponty argues: ‘To understand and judge a society, one has to penetrate its basic structure to the human bond upon which it is built.’ Thus one arrives at a ‘formula for the concrete study of a society which cannot be refuted by idealist arguments’. It is on this basis that quite different societies, representing different solutions to the problem of coexistence, can be compared and they must not be judged, he insists, without such an understanding. Their value depends, as he rather blandly puts it, on the value they place ‘upon man’s relation to man.’⁶¹ To his credit, Merleau-Ponty alluded to non-Western societies – for example, India and China – as non-rationalist examples of modes of coexistence and acknowledged the limitations of Western perspectives

in making sense of their ontologies. He also insisted that the international ramifications of liberal capitalism and colonialism be included in their evaluation. But his more immediate concern had been to find a way of comparing liberal and communist alternatives from other than a Kantian, ethical point of view and to insist that no nation should be obliged to take sides without fully understanding the existential alternatives on offer. Again, then, it is this act of clarification that the philosopher provides. In *Humanism and Terror* Merleau-Ponty had written of the ‘imperative to maintain the habit of discussion, criticism, research, and the apparatus of social and political culture.’⁶²

Certainly, Merleau-Ponty acknowledged that ‘it is not easy to render the diagnosis. Nor is it easy to find a remedy.’⁶³ By the 1950s he feared that politics was descending into chaos. By 1960 he was bemoaning the evanescence of collective reason and lamenting that in politics, ‘one has the oppressive sensation of blazing a trail which must be endlessly reopened’.⁶⁴ But noting the ‘havoc’ caused by ‘routine thinking and political improvisation’, he still called upon philosophical intervention so that society’s ‘deeper meanings’ might be elicited and reflected critically upon.⁶⁵ By *Adventures of the Dialectic* we can see how tortuous this process had become, yet how in keeping with the provisionality of phenomenological description. Merleau-Ponty refers to an ‘attempt to report our experience frankly with all its false starts, its omissions, its disparities, and the possibility of revisions at a later date’. One begins only with samplings, probings, anecdotes, ‘the continual rumination which goes on in the course of reading, personal meetings, and current events’.⁶⁶ If the aim is for a totalizing analysis, then its progress remains provisional and hazardous and radically incomplete.

In our so-called postmodern age, the ambition to understand history while changing it perhaps sounds naïve or quaint (although Merleau-Ponty might well have discerned in postmodern phenomena a recognizable coexistential style, while Husserl would surely have judged them symptomatic of modernity’s continuing crisis). Yet, at a time when liberalism has become hegemonic and materialist or existentialist analysis has fallen out of favour, Merleau-Ponty’s exhortation that we should learn ‘to confront ideas with the social functions they claim to articulate, to compare our perspective with others, and to relate our ethics to our politics’⁶⁷ would provide the starting point for a profound critique of most contemporary thinking in both politics and philosophy, as well as the impetus for a renewed criticism of the current direction politics

and coexistential relations are taking. In this sense the kind of phenomenological intervention he was practising remains timely.

Notes

1. P. Ricoeur, 'The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology', in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1974, p. 247 n.7.
2. Among other examples, see M. Foucault, 'Structuralism and Post-Structuralism: An Interview with Michel Foucault', *Telos* 55, 1983, pp. 197f.; G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. G. Burchell and H. Tomlinson, Verso, London, 1994, pp. 149–51.
3. For an account of Merleau-Ponty's access to the Archives, see H.L. Breda, 'Merleau-Ponty's Access to the Husserl Archives at Louvain', trans. S. Michelman, in *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Texts and Dialogues*, ed. H. Silverman and J. Barry, Amherst NY, 1992.
4. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith, Routledge, London, 1962, p. viii.
5. E. Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. A. Orianne, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973, pp. 67, 71, 94, 119.
6. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. R. McCleary, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1964, p. 155.
7. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. H. Dreyfus and P. Dreyfus, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1964, p. 71.
8. Merleau-Ponty, 'The Philosophy of Existence', trans. A. Weiss, in *Texts and Dialogues*, p. 139.
9. M. Merleau-Ponty, 'Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man', trans. J. Wild, in *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1964, p.92.
10. *Sense and Non-Sense*, p. 133.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 65, 81, 82.
12. 'Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man', p. 92.
13. *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. vii, xvi.
14. *Ibid.*, p. xiv.
15. See, for example D. Olkowski, *Gilles Deleuze and the Ruin of Representation*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999, pp. 60f.
16. M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1968, p. 191.
17. *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 430.
18. *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 4.
19. *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 291; 'The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences', trans. J. Edie, in *Primacy of Perception*, p. 12; *The Visible and the Invisible*, pp. 188, 208, 216.
20. *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 139.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
22. M. Merleau-Ponty, 'Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Hegel', trans. H. Silverman, *Telos* 29, Fall 1976, p. 101.
23. *Signs*, p. 162; *In Praise of Philosophy*, trans. J. Wild, J. Edie and J. O'Neill, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1963, p. 183.
24. *Signs*, p. 165.
25. E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. D. Carr, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 1970, p. 12.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 48f.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 15ff., 58f, 72f.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 124, 134, 142.
31. *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xiii.
32. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, trans. J. O'Neill, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969, p. 104.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. xxxv.
34. *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 165.
35. 'Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Hegel', pp. 104f.
36. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. J. Bien, London, Heinemann, 1973, pp. 231, 232.
37. *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 183.
38. *Ibid.*, pp. 165, 176, 274.
39. Merleau-Ponty in Person', trans. J. Barry Jr., in *Texts and Dialogues*, p. 13.
40. 'Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man', p. 84; *Signs*, p. 106.
41. M. Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', in *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. D. Krell, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1977, pp. 189–242.
42. 'Philosophy and Non-Philosophy since Hegel', p. 46.
43. *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 274.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
46. *Ibid.*, pp. 100, 90.
47. *Texts and Dialogues*, p. 12.
48. *Humanism and Terror*, p. 37.
49. *Adventures of the Dialectic*, p. 6; see also *Humanism and Terror*, p. 63.
50. *Humanism and Terror*, p. xxxviii.
51. *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 48f., 61.
52. *Humanism and Terror*, p. 110.
53. *Signs*, p. 216.
54. *Adventures of the Dialectic*, p. 4.
55. Merleau-Ponty alludes to this negative logic of history on many occasions. See, for example, *Humanism and Terror*, pp. xxxv, 153f; *Sense and Non-Sense*, p. 105; *Signs*, p. 239; *Adventures of the Dialectic*, pp. 22, 23, 24; *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 95.
56. *Adventures of the Dialectic*, p. 3.
57. *Ibid.*, 12–15, 29.
58. *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 21ff.
59. 'Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man', pp. 69 f.
60. *Signs*, p. 93.
61. *Humanism and Terror*, p. xiv.
62. *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
63. *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.
64. *Signs*, p. 3.
65. *Texts and Dialogues*, p. 8.
66. *Adventures of the Dialectic*, p. 3.
67. *Humanism and Terror*, p. 177.