“A MATRIX OF INTELLECTUAL AND HISTORICAL EXPERIENCES”: THE MARXIST CORE IN MERLEAU-PONTY’S POST-WAR THINKING

Jean-Philippe Deranty (Macquarie University)

This article seeks to re-evaluate the importance of the political in the thinking of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The article first shows that Sartre’s description of Merleau-Ponty’s intellectual trajectory as one of increasing political apathy from the 1950s onwards is inaccurate. The article then demonstrates that throughout the post-war period, including in his project for a new ontology, Merleau-Ponty believed that a revised version of Marxism would provide the methodological framework within which philosophical work could address the political challenges of the present. This revised Marxism was to be a direct alternative to the reifying uses of Marx’s thinking. It would rely upon the latter’s self-reflexive historicism, which meant its very failures showed how philosophy might transform itself in connection with its own time.

Cet article tente souligner la place du politique dans la pensée de Maurice Merleau-Ponty. On contestera d’abord la description faite par Sartre de sa trajectoire intellectuelle, selon laquelle il aurait fait preuve d’une apathie croissante, à partir des années cinquante, vis-à-vis des questions politiques. On montrera ensuite que durant toute la période d’après-guerre, jusque dans les recherches ontologiques ultimes, Merleau-Ponty a pensé qu’un usage renouvelé du marxisme permettrait au travail philosophique de répondre aux défis politiques du présent. Une telle révision du marxisme représenterait une alternative directe aux usages réifiant de la pensée de Marx. Cette révision serait rendue possible par la réflexivité histori-ciste de cette pensée, qui fait que, dans ses erreurs mêmes, celle-ci révèle la capacité de la philosophie à se transformer au contact de son temps.
There have been a few excellent studies, notably in recent years, that have emphasized the political dimensions of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's initial phenomenological project, and the political significance of his later ontological inquiries. This article aims to further explore this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's thinking, and show that he remained committed to a revised version of Marxism even in the very last years of his activity, when he defined his project in the terms of a new ontology.

The claim that there is an irreducible “Marxist core” in Merleau-Ponty's post-war thinking, including in the late ontological inquiries, might seem exaggerated or even mistaken. Whilst textual evidence makes it impossible to deny the importance of Marxian themes in the years immediately following the war, most commentators assume that this influence waned significantly mid-way through the 1950s.\(^1\) His advocacy for a “new liberalism” in the postface to the *Adventures of the Dialectic* in 1955 can be taken as a good historical marker of such a development.\(^2\) This article will contest this vision of Merleau-Ponty's relationship to Marx and argue that Marx remained a core reference for him until the very end. This continued reference to Marx, in turn, has significant implications for the interpretation of his late philosophical project.

The article begins at the biographical level, focusing on a moment of crisis in the life of Merleau-Ponty, when he was forced to explain in his own words how he conceived of his philosophical development. This moment is the rupture with Jean-Paul Sartre in July 1953, coinciding with his departure from *Les Temps modernes*. Responding to his friend's accusations of increasing political apathy, Merleau-Ponty affirmed that he continued to hold the same fundamental views about the relationship that philosophical work should have to politics and the historical context. At the time, for French intellectuals a key aspect of this relationship was Marx and his role in philosophical work.

The second section zooms out from this revealing moment and asks whether the position Merleau-Ponty claimed he continuously maintained above extended not just to 1953, but also to 1955, the

---

1. I use the term “Marxian” to refer to concepts and ideas that relate directly to Karl Marx himself. As the article will attempt to show, a key aspect of Merleau-Ponty's post-war writings was the critique of established forms of “Marxist” philosophy and politics and the attempt to develop a more open, self-correcting Marxism.

The Marxist Core in Merleau-Ponty

3

year AD was published. Far from signifying his departure from Marxism, Merleau-Ponty's "new liberalism" only makes sense in the context of discussions on how best to adapt Marxism to the political present, I argue. It is best understood as a form of radical-democratic socialism that remains highly dependent on Marxian tropes.

The third section takes a larger perspective still. It considers the whole period of Merleau-Ponty's activity following the war up to his death in May 1961. Using the preface to *Signs* as a key document, I try to show that the singular conceptual and methodological strength Merleau-Ponty saw in Marx's thought was the way in which it aimed to be self-reflexive and anchor itself in its own historical context. As a self-reflexive historicism, there is a fallibilist trait in Marxism that attracted Merleau-Ponty throughout the post-war years.

The fourth section establishes the implications of this vision of Marxism as a philosophy uniquely placed to transform itself in response to a new historical context. I highlight different dimensions entailed in such a self-reflexive stance and argue that they provide the general framework for the ontological inquiries of Merleau-Ponty's last years. The conclusion is that there is a deep political core at the very heart of Merleau-Ponty's late ontology, one that remains directly shaped by Marx's influence.

1. The 1953 Crisis

Like many other philosophers, Merleau-Ponty was convinced that there are deep connections between philosophical work and the social world in which it is performed. This insight was particularly significant for him as a phenomenologist inspired by Edmund Husserl, since a basic assumption of Husserlian phenomenology is that theoretical questions arise from problems that have their source in "natural attitudes," and that the solutions to those problems are to be found in a proper description of the structures of experience. These include in particular an account of how individual experience relates to the cultural and social layers of the lifeworld. For existentialist philosophers approaching the middle of the 20th century, such connection between transcendental analysis, everyday experience, and social life took on a specific dimension. Of particular significance were the tensions inherent in collective life and the responsibilities of the individual in relation to them. One mission of philosophy was to assist individuals and the collective in working out the right position to adopt in the midst of unavoidable struggles. In the context of intellectual and political life in France at the time, this de-
manded in particular that one clarify one’s position in relation to Marxist philosophy and Marxist politics.

This intimate link in existentialist phenomenology between the personal, the transcendental, and the political suggests that the inquiry can begin by focusing on a famous and particularly revealing moment in French intellectual life of the post-war era: the rupture between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. Starting the analysis with a biographical lens has the advantage of showing very concretely what issues were at stake for the philosophers when they debated the relationship between phenomenology, politics, and Marxism.

The unease between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty began in 1950, with their diverging reactions to the Korean War. For Merleau-Ponty, the intervention of the USSR in support of the North Korean forces was evidence that the ideal of a proletarian revolution had turned into its opposite. From that moment on, Merleau-Ponty no longer had any illusions about the reality of the Soviet State. However, since that State was the incarnation in history of the Marxist program, its transformation into the same type of brutal, imperialist regime that Merleau-Ponty also condemned in the “liberal” camp could not fail to have major implications for the very idea of proletarian revolution, and for the definition of a leftist position in everyday politics. Sartre, for his part, continued to uphold *Les Temps modernes’s* official line as a support to the Communist Party from the outside. In 1952, after an escalating series of conflicts, Merleau-Ponty announced that he was going to publish a text explaining his general position, in particular his views on Sartre’s alignment with the Communist Party. We have the letters that the two exchanged around that time, in which Sartre explained his reasons for preventing Merleau-Ponty from publishing a political text in the journal for which he was the political editor, and in which Merleau-Ponty responded with his resignation. These letters, in particular Merleau-Ponty’s careful reply, reveal the philosophical stakes of the dispute.

Sartre’s justification for his editorial tyranny was that since 1950, following the impact of the Korean War on his interpretation of the

---


4 See PD, 134–69; DSMP, 327–54.
The Marxist Core in Merleau-Ponty

contemporary context, Merleau-Ponty had retreated from politics. Not only did he now refuse to take sides between the communist and the non-communist worlds, he in fact no longer wanted to engage in politics at all, and only wanted to do pure philosophy. At the mundane level of the journal’s direction, this led to a lack of leadership. The journal was now rudderless precisely on the political questions to which it was supposed to be most dedicated. As Sartre wrote to Merleau-Ponty,

If you are not doing anything, then you don’t have the right to make political criticisms; you have the right to write your book, but that’s all [at the time, Merleau-Ponty was writing *La Prose du monde*].... I think your choice to be rigorous ought to be restricted to the pure reflection about history and society. But you don’t have the right to play both games. (DSMP, 334)

These words capture well how Sartre had construed the intellectual and affective development of his friend, a view he developed into a full existentialist-psychoanalytical reconstruction in his long eulogy of October 1961. This latter text establishes an image of Merleau-Ponty’s relation to politics in the last decade of his life that has not been challenged by commentators.

All the textual evidence shows that in the 1940s politics was a key concern for Merleau-Ponty. In particular, as Bryan Smyth has shown in relation to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, the political was not just a concern at a practical level, but also a central plank in his attempt to correct the direction of phenomenology itself. But in relation to the last decade of his work, Sartre’s narrative has not been questioned. Interpretations diverge between those who read his evolution in the last decade of his life as one of increasing social conservatism and those, like Kerry Whiteside, who acknowledge his continued interventions in the politics of the time but stress that “after abandoning the Marxian hypothesis, Merleau-Ponty never again took up a revolutionary cause.” In either case, it seems to be taken for granted that Merleau-Ponty abandoned Marxism altogether, both as a direction for political options, and as a valid philosophical reference. Whilst the *Phenomenology of Perception* contains

---

numerous, often unexpected considerations on Marx and historical materialism,8 Merleau-Ponty’s late writings gathered in *The Visible and the Invisible* seem to have abandoned all revolutionary impulse and seem to be concerned solely with ontological questions.9 Accordingly, Merleau-Ponty’s thinking appears to have moved from the attempt to forge a marriage between Husserlian methodology and the Hegelian-Marxian theory of history in his early work to a rereading of Husserl’s last writings in the light of Heidegger’s ontology in his later writing.

Merleau-Ponty’s response to Sartre, in his letter of 18 July 1953, already challenges this reading of Merleau-Ponty’s later thought. That letter provides a crucial insight into Merleau-Ponty’s own view of the links between philosophical work and politics. A long passage is worth quoting in full as it gives his direct testimony on these issues:

> What you call my “sudden change” is above all a sudden awakening of your attention, and my “subjective” decision, a small crack in the “objective” world which you have construed for yourself for some time now. I have never changed in the will to do philosophy.... My action in *Les Temps modernes* for several years, and during the war in the bulletin of the Sartre movement for several months, always tended to bring the facts toward their theory.... In no way did I renounce writing on politics in 1950; on the contrary, I always thought that *The Prose of the World* would have a second part on Catholicism and a third part on the revolution.... I decided after the Korean war, and this is an entirely different matter, no longer to write on events as they present themselves. I did this for reasons which belong to the nature of that period and for other reasons which are permanent.... I suggested several times that we put into the journal whole studies rather than premature positions, in short to aim at the head of the reader and not at the heart, which is, moreover, in keeping with our manner and that of the journal. There I found the action of a writer (*une action d’écrivain*), which consists in the comings and goings between the event and the general line, and not attacking (in the imagination)

---

8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, (tr.) D. A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012). The last chapter, entitled “Freedom,” immediately comes to mind with the analyses of class membership and historical action, but such analyses appear well justified given the chapter’s problematic. Much more striking are the sudden references to Marx in the foreword (p. xxi) or at the end of the chapter on sexuality (§1, p. 5).

every event as if it were decisive, unique, and irrecoverable. This method is closer to politics than your method of constant engagement (in the Cartesian sense). For, at the same time, it is more philosophical because the distance that it contrives between the event and the judgment which one makes of it disarms the trap of the event and allows one to see its meaning clearly. I therefore have no need to separate philosophy from the world in order to remain a philosopher,— and I have never done that.... Even if philosophy does not choose between communism and anticommunism, it is a position in the world, not an abstention; it is by no means reserved for the philosopher by profession, and it manifests itself outside of his books. (DSMP, 338–40; trans. mod.)

Merleau-Ponty reminds Sartre of the extent of the personal political engagements he undertook in recent years and rejects the entirety of Sartre’s interpretation. Merleau-Ponty confirms that he has always approached political questions from a philosophical perspective. The letter explains what this means in simple terms, namely to search for the sense, the multi-dimensional directions of historical development, in the chaos of present events, relating them to their past conditions and their possible future orientations. Merleau-Ponty also makes the point that one in no way abandons politics when one looks at events in this way. This defines a specific type of engagement for the philosopher: “une action d’écrivain,” acting as a writer. Such a type of action, we might note, is premised only on taking up a particular attitude to the present, and thus is one that anyone can take.

Merleau-Ponty was well aware of the specific model of political intervention on the basis of which Sartre was judging him. In the 1950s, notably in The Communists and Peace, Sartre developed a quasi-ontological vision of political engagement.10 According to this vision, the class of the dominated does not exist in and of itself. In the immanence of social life, it is dispersed in an indefinite number of isolated individuals, unconscious of themselves as a class, submerged by suffering and alienation. The party is needed to crystallize this mass into a class. The party is only the expression of the proletariat, but the proletariat would not exist without the party. The individual decisionism of Being and Nothingness is thus transplanted into the social and the political. The consequence is that every mo-

ment in political life is decisive since the proletariat is constantly on
the verge of dissipating as a class unless it is kept in existence by the
voluntaristic actions of the party that represents it. Merleau-Ponty
rightly compares this to Descartes’s theory of the “création continu-
ée,” the idea that God must sustain his creation in every moment by
discrete acts of will. Such a vision of commitment raises the stakes
immensely for individuals. Any hint of uncertainty, any ambivalence,
and indeed any criticism, are akin to treason to the proletarian cause
since they risk destroying the class qua class, and thereby entrench-
ing bourgeois domination. Merleau-Ponty refuses this overly tragic
vision of the relation between politics and intellectual work. Instead
he defends the political significance of a seemingly more detached,
philosophical stance. For him, this stance is more helpful because it
brings to the political present precisely what a philosophical outlook
is uniquely in a position to bring, namely tools to delineate sense
from non-sense.

Merleau-Ponty’s letter raises fascinating questions regarding the
conceptual and methodological framing of the different stages in his
phenomenological project over the years. He claims that the inter-
connection between philosophy and politics outlined in the letter of
July 1953 had been his constant position from 1945 onwards, but
one must then question how far this continuity extends after 1953.
Does AD, published in 1955, really mark a rupture with politics, a
rupture of the kind Merleau-Ponty denied happened in the years
1950–53? What are the philosophical consequences if such a
continuity can be established, notably in relation to Marx, who was
the primary reference for framing the political in the earlier decade?

2. Merleau-Ponty’s “New Liberalism”

Merleau-Ponty’s general project in AD belies the idea of increased
political apathy. The book studies the different shapes that the
dialectic has taken in its concrete applications in the 20th century,
specifically as the concept that informed different models of prole-
tarian revolution. The whole point of this analysis is to identify
where these applications went wrong, what these failures signaled
for an improved understanding of dialectics, and in turn what a new
emancipatory politics premised upon a corrected version of dialectics
would look like. The epilogue to AD reaffirms these intrinsically
political aims. In the process, the text demonstrates that Merleau-

11 As Whiteside argues in Merleau-Ponty, 232.
Ponty continues to aim for an “action as a writer,” as he said in his letter to Sartre, where philosophical concepts can help one understand the logics that are at play at the heart of historical processes.

More specifically, this epilogue provides important elements that situate the role of Marxism in Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the political dimension in his phenomenological project. This revolves notably around the interpretation of the oft-cited appeal to a “new liberalism.” The adjective “new” obviously aims to distinguish it from what would have been viewed at the time as a classical form of that political theory:

We see now in what sense one must speak of a new liberalism: it is not a question of returning to an optimistic and superficial philosophy which reduces the history of society to speculative conflicts of opinion, political struggle to exchange of views on clearly posed problems, and the coexistence of men to relationships of fellow citizens in the political empyrean. (AD, 225)

It is difficult to know exactly which historical figures and political moments, formalized in which precise strand of ideas in French political history, Merleau-Ponty had in mind. For us, the conception of politics he is characterizing as the antithesis of his “new” liberalism looks remarkably like a forerunner of discourse ethics or Rawls’s theory of justice, as it centres on the exchange of reasons in a democratic forum and the search for a reasonable consensus. In the French context, this would have been associated with the kind of centrist republicanism that rose to power with the Third Republic and was still in power under the Fourth, at the time when Merleau-Ponty was writing this text. It is important to note that Merleau-Ponty remained unwavering in his rejection of this kind of political theory. For our concerns, however, what matters more are the reasons Merleau-Ponty cites to reject this kind of liberalism.

This kind of liberalism is no longer practiced anywhere. There is a class struggle and there must be one, since there are, and as long as there will be, classes. There is and there must be a means of exceptional action for the proletarian class, the strike, since its

---

fate is also exceptional and since by definition it is in a minority. Moreover, this class has the right to be represented, if it so desires, by a party which refuses the rules of the democratic game, since this game places it at a disadvantage.... In addition: there have been and there will be revolutionary movements, and they are justified by their own existence, since they are proof that the society in which they arise does not allow the workers to live.

(Ibid.)

As this passage indicates, Merleau-Ponty rejects a definition of “liberalism” as merely a democratic exchange of views for two main reasons. First, it ignores the reality of class struggle. That reality is premised on the existence of classes, that is, domination of some groups by others. Such domination makes a mockery of the democratic ideal associated with classical liberalism because the political equality at the base of that theory is directly contradicted by the lack of equality in social and cultural conditions, which puts the majority of the population in a situation of “minority.” Second, if one takes seriously the reality of social life, then another notion of political representation and political action emerges, one that is again antithetical to the centrist democratic model: recognizing the strike as a form of political action, and thus not restricting politics to parliamentary procedures; recognizing the right of the proletariat to be represented by a party that rejects parliamentarianism; indeed, recognizing the right to wage a revolution.

The language chosen by Merleau-Ponty to reject classical liberalism is unmistakably Marxist. The “new liberalism” he calls for is fully compatible with an analysis of social life in Marxist terms. But if his version of liberalism has all these features, which no other liberal strand would accept, how different is it from a classical Marxist position? The rest of the passage explains the relevant difference:

If we speak of liberalism, it is in the sense that communist action and other revolutionary movements are accepted only as a useful menace, as a continual call to order, that we do not believe in a solution of the social problem through the power of the proletarian class or its representatives, that we expect progress only from a conscious action which will confront itself with the judgement of an opposition. For us a non-communist left is this double position, posing social problems in terms of struggle and refusing the dictatorship of the proletariat. (Ibid.)

The term “liberalism” is clearly chosen as an alternative to “communism,” by which Merleau-Ponty means a form of politics associat-
ed with established movements in Western countries following the lead of the USSR, those movements that sought to embody in real politics the proletarian revolution envisaged by Marx and Engels in the previous century. As we just saw, Merleau-Ponty fully accepts a Marx-inspired analysis of social life as structured by class domination, giving rise to class struggles. What he objects to is the form in which this social substrate should translate into political action. In fact, the text is at pains to distinguish this “new liberalism” from a position that would be “anti-communist.” Instead he equates it with a position that is “non-” or “a-communist” (AD, 224–25). The point of all these distinctions is to define how one might continue to rely on Marx but in a politically enfranchised manner, beyond the strictures of established communist parties. Merleau-Ponty explicitly makes the rejection of the exclusive disjunction between communism and anti-communism a condition for adequately thinking “the problems of Marx,” that is, the critique of capitalism and based upon this critique, the theory of emancipation: “a-communism...is the condition of a modern critique of capitalism, because only it posits in modern terms the problems of Marx” (AD, 225). This is an unmistakable endorsement of Marx as the philosopher who had posed modern problems in the correct way, in relation to both critical social analysis and politics.

One is thus tempted to call Merleau-Ponty’s brand of “liberalism” instead a form of “radical-democratic Marxism,” since the fundamental assumption about the social basis of politics remains wholly dependent on Marx’s analyses. What is “a-communist” or “new-liberal” in this position is the institutional option, its “radical-democratic” appeal, since the dictatorship of the proletariat is abandoned, and full political representation emphasized, at the same time as individual rights feature centrally in other writings of the time. This political position is a form of “democratic socialism,” as had been embodied in French left-wing politics by the charismatic figure of Jean Jaurès. It also chimed in with the analyses developed by the “Socialism or Barbarism” group at the same time, amongst whom students of Merleau-Ponty were active.13 Beyond the issues of political action and institutional organisation, the epilogue also confirms a position that Merleau-Ponty maintains right to the end: to realize

---

justice, a robust democracy should include democratic control over the organisation of production.\textsuperscript{14}

An important article on “The Future of the Revolution” also published in 1955 confirms the complex constellation in which communist politics are rejected whilst Marx’s broader analytical framework continues to be endorsed (S, 278–92). In this article, Merleau-Ponty refers extensively to a study by Benno Sarel, a member of Socialisme ou Barbarie, on the social and economic conditions that led to the uprising in East Berlin in 1953. Merleau-Ponty uses Sarel’s data to establish a diagnosis of the contemporary communist systems and to show once again that the very idea of proletarian revolution had produced the opposite of what it aimed to achieve. Yet the final conclusion he drew from it was not that Marxist thought as a whole had therefore been disproved. The social, economic, and political contradictions of existing communist regimes demonstrated only the wrongness of the orthodox conception of revolutionary politics, of a realization of emancipation through the proletariat establishing a dictatorship that would allegedly overcome the contradictions of previous regimes. Such a misguided political idea did not impugn the goal of universal emancipation, which Merleau-Ponty continued to construe in Marx’s terms as the abolition of exploitation: “In order to change the proletarians’ needs, suffering, and exploitation into a civilization, we should not count on a dictatorship established in their name but on their claims rendered in their immediate virulence” (S, 292).

On the basis of this textual evidence demonstrating the continuing importance of the Marxian reference until 1955, the earlier question arises again, and this time demands that we consider the entirety of Merleau-Ponty’s post-war work: if the continuity in Merleau-Ponty’s views on the deep political significance of philosophy and of Marx’s role in it extends beyond 1953 into 1955, and if these views can be identified in the very text that is supposed to mark his departure from politics, how far do they extend? What is the relationship between these views and the shift to ontological questions? What is the place of Marxist philosophy in the late ontological inquiries?

\textsuperscript{14} See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, \textit{Signs}, (tr.) R. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), Preface, 4. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as S.
3. The Marxist Core of Merleau-Ponty’s Late Philosophy

If we consider Merleau-Ponty’s work from the perspective established in the previous sections, his claim in 1953 of a deep continuity in his thinking since 1945 appears to remain generally true until the very end. He continuously maintained the need to engage in philosophical inquiry into the political present, and conversely that a philosophical outlook had significant, if specific and mediated, political value. Furthermore, an overview of Merleau-Ponty’s later work leads to the conclusion that he never gave up on the idea that a revised version of Marxism provided the philosophical position upon which could rest a viable mode of linking philosophy and politics.

A particularly striking document in that respect is *Signs* (1960), the last book Merleau-Ponty published before his death. The book’s structure is similar to the 1948 *Sense and Non-Sense*: it deals first with philosophy, and then political commentary. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty republishes in it some of the articles that had appeared in *Les Temps modernes*. In particular, he selects the crucial 1950 article on the camps in the USSR. This article seems to speak against the continuity claim, since it is one of the earliest documents which established the untenability of a dogmatic communist position through the reference to the facts of Soviet totalitarianism as they gradually became known in the West. But this is also an article where Merleau-Ponty, after rejecting the comparison between Nazism and Stalinism, states, “[W]e have nothing in common with a Nazi and the same values as a Communist,” in the sense that “we have nothing in common with a good number of communism’s adversaries” (S, 268–69).

The next article, published in 1955, discusses the relevance of the personality of leaders in great historical events. From a vulgar Marxist position, the psychology of the leaders is uninteresting since history is moved by structural forces that operate underneath the personality traits of its actors. Against this, Merleau-Ponty promotes a philosophical Marxism that is rigorous, coherent, admits the plurality of causes in history, deciphers the same dialectic at play in all of them, integrates “personal conceptions” instead of excluding them. But to the extent it does so, it is transformed into another philosophy, which is quite different from vulgar Marxism, and which Marx undoubtedly would not have wished to recognize as his own. (S, 275)

The passage does not merely describe what a “rigorous, coherent” Marxism would need to do in the context. It clearly endorses the transformed Marxism that would emerge from it as the “other phi-
losophy," the kind of revised, open dialectic that Merleau-Ponty thought was to be developed as the necessary tool for an adequate comprehension of the present.

This is precisely the theme articulated by the preface of Signs: beyond the official Marxism of communist parties, and beyond the shortcomings that can be found in Marx himself, there is a philosophical way of using Marxian resources that remains invaluable. This is when Marxism is used as “a matrix of intellectual and historical experiences, which can always be saved from failure by means of some additional hypotheses” (S, 10). Or, as Merleau-Ponty states in a previous passage,

[W]ith the events of recent years, Marxism has definitely entered a new phase of its history, in which it can inspire and orient analyses, and retain a serious heuristic value, but is certainly no longer true in the sense in which it thought it was. By placing Marxism in the order of secondary truth, recent experience gives Marxists a new foundation and almost a new method, which makes it useless to call them to court. (S, 9; trans. mod.)

There are two opposite ways of reading the passages just cited. In them, Merleau-Ponty seems to take his distance from Marxism, as when he writes that it “is certainly no longer true in the sense in which it thought it was” and when he refers to “Marxists” from the position of an outsider. One interpretation of this distance could be as a form of self-criticism. It is difficult to argue against the general, heuristic importance of Marx for Merleau-Ponty throughout his work, to the extent that Marx is for him a philosopher who anticipated the need for philosophy to think from within the immanence of the lived world. This translates into the two fundamental tasks, which Merleau-Ponty himself takes up in his own philosophical work: positively, to develop theoretical tools that do justice to the links between different realms of experience; and critically, to debunk all forms of dualism and reductionism. Beyond this very general point, however, one could argue that in the texts immediately following the war, notably those that are gathered in Humanism and Terror, Merleau-Ponty adds a much more substantive element to this general appraisal, emphasizing the uniqueness of the Marxist position from the point of view of modern history and politics. This is

---

15 See the explicit statements reproduced by Emmanuel de Saint Aubert in Vers une ontologie indirecte. Sources et enjeux critiques de l’appel à l’ontologie chez Merleau-Ponty (Paris: Vrin, 2006), 66–68.
the idea that Marxist philosophy is unlike any other theory, since it aims, as a theoretical exercise, to subsume itself into the practice of the revolutionary class. This assumption translates philosophically into the need to challenge the core assumptions of classical, “bourgeois” philosophy in all of its domains by erasing the divide between theory and practice and reframing all human endeavours, including science, art, and moral action, within the historical development of class struggle. In the post-1953 texts just cited, Merleau-Ponty can be taken to bid farewell to this assumption and to renounce a Lukácsian idea he flirted with: that revolutionary practice is also directly revolutionary for theory.

However, the 1960 preface to *Signs* proposes another thread, which repeats one already introduced in the 1955 Yalta papers article and leads to a different reading of the passages above. This thread points to a different continuity in Merleau-Ponty’s relation to Marx, one that emphasizes the “reflexive” nature of the latter’s philosophical thinking. In all of the texts cited, Merleau-Ponty argues that Marxism should be “transformed” to remain adequate to the present. This could be taken as an indication of Marxism’s weaknesses. But why would Merleau-Ponty insist on retaining a flawed philosophical approach? One only seeks to adapt a tool or an instrument if one thinks it can still be useful in circumstances other than those for which it was devised. It is useful to amend Marxism because “it can inspire and orient analyses, and retain a serious heuristic value” (S, 9). In fact, the need for Marxism to transform itself points to its very superiority as a theoretical approach. It is not just that Marxism needs to be transformed, but also that it is uniquely placed to do so, to transform itself as philosophy in light of a new present, because it is the philosophy that showed eminently how the philosophical exercise is conditioned by, reflects, and can thus act upon, its own present. And precisely that feature is what is required of a philosophy adapted to the present. The very fact that it is Marxism that needs to be “transformed” is an indication of why it is invaluable, why it is worthwhile to “always” try to “save it from failure by means of some additional hypotheses,” namely because it is the very philosophy that can show how a philosophy can be a philosophy of its own time. In other words, the specific conceptual and methodological weaknesses of Marxism in any given context are also a paradoxical sign of its unique theoretical strength, namely its historical self-reflexivity, based on its theoretical decision to make theory intrinsically a moment of historical time. To put it differently, what draws Merleau-Ponty to Marx is that he was an avowedly fallibilist philosopher, one of the first to include the possibility that theory might be
overtaken and forced to change in a new historical context characterized by new scientific knowledge, and to consider this possibility as a defining feature of theory itself. When Merleau-Ponty identifies Marxism (in 1960) “as a matrix of intellectual and historical experiences” (S, 10; my emphasis), we might understand it as an endorsement of this reading, which ties theory to history. Crucially, however, we should also remember that the enduring nature of this link stems from the enduring existence of exploitation and class struggle.

If this reading is correct, then one could argue that the shifts in Merleau-Ponty’s positioning towards Marx adumbrated above might in fact be grounded in a deeper continuity, premised upon the fundamental “heuristic value” of Marx’s philosophical approach for him. In fact, such a reading finds textual support if we compare the position taken in 1960 to many of the texts of the late 1940s and early 1950s. The distinction between classical, ossified, party Marxism on the one hand, and a new, philosophical, “heuristic” Marxism on the other, is already in place in these texts. For example, in the important article “For the Sake of Truth” of November 1945, which defined the philosophical-political program of Les Temps modernes, Merleau-Ponty announces,

[We can no longer have a proletarian Marxist politics along classical lines, because this politics has lost its grip on the facts. Our only recourse is a reading of the present which is as comprehensive and as faithful as possible, which does not prejudice its meaning, which even recognizes chaos and non-sense wherever they exist, but which does not refuse to discern a direction and an idea in events where they appear.]^{16}

This sounds already like a characterization of the position Merleau-Ponty describes in the letter of July 1953 as the necessary “distance” that a philosophical outlook needs to take on events. In light of a text like this, we can see even more precisely what Merleau-Ponty has in mind when he tells Sartre that his position has not wavered between 1945 and 1952. At the heart of this “action at a distance” is a creative, non-orthodox use of Marx. Many other articles of that period attest that this was already the model in the years when Merleau-Ponty was still embracing revolutionary politics, in particular those in which Existentialism was identified with a humanist reading of

---

Marx. In those texts, the philosophy that replaces proletarian philosophy remains Marxist, but it is already a revised, paradoxical Marxism in which Marx would not have recognized himself and yet which remains faithful to him on the basis of its own historical self-reflexivity. Throughout the post-war years, the term that Merleau-Ponty chooses to characterize this “transformed” Marxism that responds to its time, and in turn helps to understand it, is “critique” as “concrete thinking”: “that concrete thinking which Marx calls critique in order to distinguish it from speculative philosophy.”

4. The Marxist Core in Merleau-Ponty’s Late Ontology

Many references echoing each other between the earlier and the later periods of Merleau-Ponty’s oeuvre confirm his self-characterization in his letter to Sartre, his vision of philosophy’s fundamental task in relation to the present, and the place of Marx in this construal of philosophy as intrinsically political. This leads to a further question: how does this vision of philosophy’s place in its historical present fit with the ontological turn of the later years?

To see more precisely the philosophical stakes of this question, we need to specify further what strengths and weaknesses Merleau-Ponty attaches to Marxism in the writing and teaching of the last decade of his life. The preface to Signs is once again a key document. After he presented the general philosophical context of the texts gathered in this volume, and after he rejected the exclusive disjunction between Marxism and anti-Marxism, Merleau-Ponty writes in conclusion of the first section,

What we defend here, under the name of philosophy, is exactly the kind of thought which the Marxists have been driven back to by the things themselves. A naïve rationality can be disappointed daily by our times. Disclosing fundamental meaning-structures through all its many fissures, our age calls for a philosophical reading. Our times have not swallowed up philosophy; philosophy does not loom over our times. Philosophy is neither history’s servant nor its master. The relationship between philosophy and history is less simple than was believed. It is in a strict sense an action at a distance (une action à distance), each from the depths of its difference requiring intermingling and promiscuity. We

---

17 See in particular Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Marxism and Philosophy,” in Sense and Non-Sense, 125–36.
18 Ibid., 133.
have yet to learn the proper use of this encroachment—and above all we have not yet learned a philosophy which is all the less tied down by political responsibilities to the extent that it has its own, and is all the more free to enter everywhere to the extent that it does not take anyone’s place (does not play at passions, politics, life, or reconstruct them in imagination), but discloses with precision the Being we inhabit. (S, 13; trans. mod.)

This passage is particularly illuminating for our purposes. The first thing to note is that we find again, almost verbatim, the notion Merleau-Ponty already outlined in his letter to Sartre of an “action at a distance” between philosophy and historical reality. In 1960, the role philosophy can play in its time has changed from the late 1940s and the early 1950s, where it was a form of Marxist Existentialism, and the mid-1950s where the emphasis was on expressive gestures and the creative instituting of sense. Now philosophy’s fundamental task is the one Merleau-Ponty is exploring in his writings at the time, notably in the notes gathered in The Visible and the Invisible, of disclosing “with precision the Being we inhabit” (ibid.). But Merleau-Ponty has not changed his mind on the relationship between philosophical inquiry and its place in the present, notably in its political dimensions. This means that for Merleau-Ponty, the ontological inquiries themselves, however far removed they might seem from everyday concerns, have a role to play in the collective context, just as much as the context frames and determines them. Indeed, as the text states clearly, it is the present situation itself that commands philosophy to turn to ontological inquiries. Humanity has been “driven” to this mode of thinking “by the things themselves.”

If we now ask what Merleau-Ponty has in mind more precisely behind this vague expression, it appears that the Marxian reference is still decisive. He states it explicitly in the passage above when he describes the new “kind of thought” he is seeking to develop as precisely the kind of thought Marxists have been forced to adopt under the pressure of historical change. Already in this way of formulating the relation between philosophical work and historical context, the notion of a transformation internal to Marxism is used once again, pointing simultaneously to its shortcomings, its capacity for self-transformation, and its unique role in helping us realize the tasks of the present.

The central role played by Marx’s thought in the present constellation comes out very clearly in the lecture series Merleau-Ponty presented in the last two years of his teaching at the Collège de France (the lectures of 1958–59 and 1960–61), at the same time as he was working on the manuscript of The Visible and the Invisible. In
each of these lecture courses, Merleau-Ponty begins by outlining the main threads of the contemporary “crisis of rationality,” in other words, the crisis underpinning theoretical understandings of the world and practical attempts at acting in the world. These lectures give a vivid sense of what Merleau-Ponty means when he frames his ontological explorations within the larger picture of a *Krisis* of contemporary culture, to use the seminal late-Husserlian reference. In these diagnoses, Marx functions once more as the central heuristic reference. In relation to each of the features of the crisis, his work represents both an eminently failure and a light showing the way towards new solutions.

What is the decisive mistake committed by Marx according to these lectures? In the realm of theory, he repeats the Hegelian gesture. Both of them offer exemplary models of “concrete thinking,” that is, of a form of thinking that extracts logical structures out of the immanence of experience. Yet they both fall short of their own projects because of their underlying rationalism, which neutralizes the negativity they have rightly identified as the key concept for thinking real processes. In Hegel’s case, negativity is reified into significations taking their place within the system (NdC, 316–20). Marx had the intention of avoiding this Hegelian abstraction, but, in his early texts at least (Merleau-Ponty’s lectures end abruptly before he can turn to *Capital*), the attempt to ground dialectic in nature, and human nature in particular, also arrests the process inherent in negativity, this time by positing positive ends to the process, in the ideal of a full realization of the potentialities of human essence and a full reconciliation with nature (*ibid.*, 351). We find this critical analysis already fore-shadowed in the lectures of the previous year on the concept of *Nature*.21

These conceptual shortcomings translate into the kinds of mistakes in the realm of practice that Merleau-Ponty already highlighted in earlier texts, and indeed in earlier lecture courses, notably the 1954 lectures on “Institution and Passivity.” Marx’s rationalistic

---

tendencies produce a conception of history and politics that leaves insufficient room for the ambiguity and “openness” of creative action (praxis). The travails of modern history are supposed to find their full resolution in the proletarian revolution. In the 20th century, such hyper-optimism led directly to the anti-democratic tragedies of the different communist phases. Ironically, the Hegelian system finds its counterpart in Stalinism, as the culmination of the positivist, technicist streak in Marx’s thinking (NdC, 352).

And yet these very mistakes, inspired as they were by the dialectical projects that led to them, continue to be definitional and inspirational. Once one realizes, in the footsteps of Hegel and Marx, that the core issue for philosophy is indeed to rise to the challenge of expressing the logos of experience, but without sacrificing the openness and ambiguity of the experiences of logos, one has thereby identified the task of contemporary philosophy. Marx provides a model in this respect in several ways.

First, even in the late ontological studies, Merleau-Ponty continues to think that a dialectical mode of thinking is the methodological tool that is required for his philosophical project.23 This is because doing justice to the openness of experience at the same time as one attempts formally to outline its specific structures requires a mode of thinking that combines analysis and synthesis, emphasizes the connections between different levels of reality, and unveils and corrects dualisms and reductionisms. These are qualities Merleau-Ponty attaches to Marx’s thinking until the very end.24

In respect to philosophy as a special discipline, this means, just as Marx had done in relation to the legacy of Hegel, challenging the established ways of practicing it. The first target is the old, metaphysical style, which was held alive through the prevalent practice in France at the time of doing philosophy through its history, a practice premised on a non-critical reference to essentialized objects (subject, object, matter, reason as separate faculty, and so on). This also entails a rejection of new forms of positivism (logical positivism, the early developments in naturalistic forms of philosophy) that reify objects and destroy the organic links that tie human beings to the world in its multiple dimensions. These diverse trends in contempo-

23 See for instance a key passage in Merleau-Ponty’s The Visible and the Invisible, 91–92, on the dialectic as “the thought we are seeking,” “a situational thought, a thought in contact with being,” whose task it is “to shake off the false evidences, to denounce the significations cut off from the experience of being.”

24 See note 15 above; the passages cited by de Saint Aubert are from 1959.
rary academic philosophy make up what Merleau-Ponty calls philosophy’s “decadence” (NdC, 39, 163–66).25

Against this stultification of philosophical practice, the new “kind of thought” called for by the times would be guided by what Marx defined as the “self-abolition of philosophy.”26 Merleau-Ponty reads in this motto a direct anticipation of the need for contemporary philosophy to conduct its analyses within “non-philosophy,” that is, contemporary practices (modern writing, painting), and new modes of knowledge (notably the new social sciences, particularly anthropology, but also psychoanalysis). In all these practices, philosophers find exemplary models and material for inquiries that begin from the immanence of the world and provide access to the complex, dialectical links between self, other, physis, and logos.

In the practical realm, Merleau-Ponty continues to think that despite the “freezing” of the revolutionary ideal in 20th century experiments with communism, for which Marx himself bore some responsibility, Marx’s work nonetheless continues to be central. As demonstrated above, Merleau-Ponty never renounced a vision of modern society as structured by exploitation and class domination, and as a result, of politics as revolving around the representation and resolution of class struggle. In an interview of 1959, Merleau-Ponty presents a concrete sense of his political vision in the last years of his life:

[D]emocratic economic planning and the corresponding political institutions are still only an idea, the benchmark of a regime that needs to be imagined in action and according to the teachings of action. If we declare it impossible in advance, this will be only in the name of certain dilemmas—private versus collective property, personal profit or wage equality, class society or the withering away of the state, economic liberalism or dictatorial planning—, and the experience of the last thirty years has shown these to be artificial rifts produced by History: nowhere does a regime exist that can be understood by either term of the antinomy. The fact that these antitheses are abstract and ideological, and that they badly describe the reality of our time, does not guarantee that we will be able to control our reality in theory or in practice—yet it suffices to set us the unconditional task of attempting to do just that. The “socialism of the 20th century” is only an idea, but if we

25 See also de Saint Aubert, Vers une ontologie indirecte, 170–76.
26 See de Saint Aubert, Vers une ontologie indirecte, p. 66 n. 7 for a list of all the passages in which Merleau-Ponty refers approvingly to the motto from The German Ideology.
are to survive or revive ourselves politically, it will be along these lines. (PD, 246; my translation)

The solution Merleau-Ponty envisages here recalls the third way he defended in 1955 as a “new liberalism.” Neither a liberal, bourgeois politics premised on private property, personal profit, and class division, nor a communist solution, premised on collective property, withering of the state, and dictatorial planification, would work. This fork in modern politics is deeply flawed. Its flaws were amply demonstrated, both in practice through the continuing injustices and dysfunctions of capitalist and communist regimes, and indeed in theory. The solution remains the same in its outline: to develop a new conceptual language in politics, in which socialism (economic planning) and democratic institutions are established together.

Another major teaching of Marx is precisely that it is abstract to divide theory and practice. As the final lecture courses reiterate in striking fashion, Merleau-Ponty always emphasized the historicality of thought, the fact that the achievements of human rationality are grounded in their historical context, including that most abstract, second-order production called philosophy. This interlocking of experience and thinking is captured in the formulas that “our times have not swallowed up philosophy; philosophy does not loom over our times. Philosophy is neither history’s servant nor its master” (S, 13). The first half of the dichotomies refers to the Lukácsian notion of an abolition of theory in emancipatory practice, a conception Merleau-Ponty flirted with in the mid-1940s. The second half refers to old-style metaphysics, which underpins the “classical liberalism” he rejected already in 1955. But the rejection of the proletarian model does not mean a rejection of Marx. Precisely, Merleau-Ponty returns to Hegel and Marx in the very last lecture course in order to delineate an original path between the two horns of a false dichotomy. The question is: what type of method can help to derive a philosophical account of the time, showing the logics of sense it harbours in such a way that we have neither a reification of the openness of logos in the form of rationalistic discourse, nor a reduction of logos in the form of metaphysical or positivistic thinking. For Merleau-Ponty, because such philosophical effort is historically tied to the development of capitalism as the general form of life in modern society, and because Marx is the prime thinker of that form of life, one of the formulations summarizing his project is the following: “to outline the philosophy at the heart of Marx’s Capital—beyond what Marx might have said of philosophy—given all that human
experience has revealed about capitalism and Marxism after Marx” (NdC, 324).

All these considerations frame the ontological inquiries of the last decade. The “flesh of the world” (la chair du monde), the focal point of his final writings collected in The Visible and the Invisible, refers to the open interconnectedness of all the dimensions of Being. To be adequately described, it requires a new kind of philosophy, a philosophy that, as Marx already argued, should be practiced from within “non-philosophy.” The urge to elaborate a new ontology is neither mere speculation, aesthetic contemplation, nor detached meta-scientific inquiry, but an essential task demanded by the crisis of the present. This crisis is a crisis of rationality and a crisis in practice, in social and political life. Ontological inquiries are thus a direct response to the challenges of the time. Their fundamental aim is to delineate an alternative vision of history that shows the sources of sense in the current context and the potentials for emancipation for all those who participate in the lifeworld in which sense-making potentialities reside.

Such anchoring of the ontological project in a Marx-inspired historical framework has significant implications at both theoretical and practical levels. Several notes written for the manuscript of The Visible and the Invisible testify to the obvious, namely that Merleau-Ponty did not pursue his ontological inquiries separately from what he was exploring in the lectures he was delivering at the same time. One particularly telling note of March 1961 is the final one presented by Claude Lefort in his historical edition of The Visible and the Invisible. In it, Merleau-Ponty summarizes the main parts of his ontological inquiry on the model of Hegel’s system: “I. The Visible; II. Nature; III. Logos.”

Bringing together the three dimensions of the visible (the “vertical” being confronting human subjectivity), nature (the ground of subjectivity) and logos (the expression of being), the “fourth” dimension is history. Saying that all logos is grounded in nature and brings to expression structures of the visible, and saying that the visible and nature owe their meaningfulness to logos, in other words, the human capacity to institute meanings in the lifeworld, all this amounts to unveiling the historical dimension in the flesh of the world. History frames the other three ontological dimensions.

We are here at the very heart of Merleau-Ponty’s late thinking. Marx’s thought is yet again the model for Merleau-Ponty’s articulation of history as the dimension that frames the three dimensions

---

27 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, 274–75.
implicated in the flesh of the world. This comes out clearly in the final words of the note from March 1961: “[T]he conception of history one will come to will be nowise ethical like that of Sartre. It will be much closer to that of Marx: Capital...as ‘mystery’ of history, expressing the ‘speculative mysteries’ of the Hegelian logic.” Indeed, to conceptualize historical experience as the point at which logos, nature, and the visible are interlocked, Merleau-Ponty in this notes gestures back to a materialist understanding of praxis, one directly inspired by the Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844: “worked-over-matter-human beings = chiasm” (trans. mod.). This directly echoes much earlier analyses in Merleau-Ponty’s Structure of Behaviour, where action is used to understand how human beings insert themselves in their worlds, and interpreted through the Hegelian-Marxian lens of human labour.28

The Marxist framing of Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology specifies the latter’s inherently political dimensions as well. This should be clear from many of the quotes cited previously. In them, Merleau-Ponty indicated that disclosing “with precision the Being we inhabit” (S, 13) was a theoretical exercise that was called for not just by a crisis of rationality in the sciences, but also a crisis of rationality in the social, “in the relations between human beings...whether there is compossibility between human beings, even de jure—the possibility of an organic form of society” (NdC, 40). This problem of whether human coexistence was possible was already the one that governed Marx’s critical work of historical reconstruction of capitalism. Read from the perspective of this particular problem, the analysis of the different threads structuring “the flesh of the world” harbours a radical potential. It emphasizes all the connections that exist between individuals and cultures, rejecting as unjustifiable all forms of social, cultural, economic, or political hierarchy or exclusion between them. This normative potential of Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology has been mobilized by many theorists seeking to establish the grounds for alternative, emancipatory ethics and politics—notably in feminist theory, animal studies, and environmental philosophy. Emphasizing the Marxian inflexion in Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology sharpens its political import and alters the way in which it can be mobilized. Most theorists who refer to Merleau-Ponty’s late work use the idea of the sharing of a common ontological plane as the basis from which to criticize or deconstruct exclusionary social practices, and as a posi-

tive reference point to model other, inclusive kinds of relations and practices. The Marxist inflexion puts the emphasis on the institutional mediations that entrench structures of domination, exploitation, and exclusion, and in turn poses the question of the shape of the new institutions that would overcome them.

In particular, one aspect of the “crisis of rationality” diagnosed in the late lecture courses is the denunciation of European ethnocentrism. This aspect of the crisis, Merleau-Ponty argues, is itself a direct product of the Marxist call for universal emancipation. By unleashing freedom movements in non-European worlds, Marxist politics have triggered a questioning of European privilege, affecting Marxist thought itself:

[W]e realize that what we thought was the order of things (all the other peoples aspiring to become like us—ethnocentrism: all behind us on the same road. Even for Marx: these problems being resolved by extension to the colonies of the notions of proletariat and universal class), is in fact a contingent historical privilege…. This means both: negation of classical social “philosophy”; a pressing need to reflect on history, to become aware; but also, as in all limit situations, the possibility of a mere repression…. This awareness can [lead to] decadence (by being erased or through pure power struggle),—or it can be an opportunity for rebirth. (NdC, 41)

As the French colonial empire was collapsing, Merleau-Ponty already sensed that the repercussions of the radical questioning of European privilege would be as immense as they would be protracted. They would not be limited to issues of political sovereignty, economic development, and cultural independence, but would affect the fundamental frames through which individual and collective lives are conceived. Even in this final anticipation of our present, post-colonial predicament, Marx’s thought continued to be paradigmatic for him. In its very limitations, it still provided a conceptual reference point that could help humanity think its own way towards its possible “rebirth.”

jp.deranty@mq.edu.au