Introduction

A recent book dealing with the political issues of the 21st Century begins with the following question: what theory can we use to guide political practice today? Or, more specifically, how can we do politics without foundations, without the rational foundations that culminated in Modernism and that have guided the West for two thousand years, since these foundations have now been critically undermined? The book surveys a variety of answers but does not mention the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. This is unfortunate, since Merleau-Ponty asks almost exactly the same question, and provides a profound answer to it, shortly before his untimely death in 1961. It is my contention that his answer/solution is still relevant today, and is so because of the remarkable balance and profound good sense of his thought, is so, more specifically, because his thought avoids the untenable extremes of both Modernism and Postmodernism. More specifically yet, his answer/solution is still relevant because he seeks neither Modernist foundations, upon which our thought would indubitably rest, nor Postmodernist conventionalism, with its arbitrary agreement of interlocutors, but “fundamental” thinking, thinking from which we may reasonably proceed, but to which we should always critically return. I will attempt here to reveal this fundamental thinking and how it relates to political theory.

In his introduction to the collection of his essays entitled Signs, published in 1960, Merleau-Ponty states that a new philosophy is needed, and, in addition, that it is needed to help develop a new theory of history/politics. He proceeds here to very briefly outline this new philosophy, although it has obviously been in the making from his earliest work on, from the late 1930s to the author’s unexpected death in 1961. Clearly, the body of Merleau-Ponty’s work displays growth and development, but, as has been argued elsewhere in depth, the general outline of this philosophy does
not change, especially the criticisms of rationalist and empiricist forms of Modernist rationality. He consistently informs us that we must not construct experience from abstract concepts, either rationalism’s formal/general relations of meaning, which cannot account for patterns of meaning that are specific or ambiguous, or empiricism’s discrete units of data in external relations, which are likewise the product of abstract analysis and ultimately bear no meaning. Rather, he consistently informs us, we must first live our embodied perceptual experience, and then look for the structures or patterns of meaning that emerge from this concrete perceptual encounter with the world. It is these structures of perceptual meaning that he refers to as a perceptual logos or rationality, and it is these concrete, fluid, and open ended perceptual structures that provide the basis for the abstract rationality that comes to be expressed in speech and language, including political speech and language. Moreover, throughout the body of Merleau-Ponty’s work human consciousness is consistently treated as an embodied perceptual awareness of, openness upon, and relationship to the greater world around us. Embodied perceptual awareness opens to a public field of natural and social relationships that includes this awareness. This embodied perceptual awareness exists in a crisscross or Fundierungs relationship with the natural and social world, including language. In both his early and later works embodied perception and the world impact upon and cross into one another (Fundierung or chiasm) to create perceptual meaning, just as perception and language cross into one another to create linguistic meaning. Perception is the primary term that suggests these linguistic expressions, yet these expressions are needed to fold back upon perception in order to articulate it more precisely, and this is true in both his early and later works. Merleau-Ponty’s thus consistently seeks to exchange the Modernist notion of a pre-existent, abstract, unchanging foundational rationality, that is independent of language, even though expressed using it, for a concrete, perceptual rationality that is constantly unfolding, and that is intimately bond up with the formative power of language. This new form of rationality is thus post Modernist but also a rationality that is “grounded” in the flow of perception and that thus escapes the arbitrary conventionalism of Postmodernist philosophies. Furthermore, it is this concrete, situated, perceptual, and thus perspectival or multicultural version of rationality that is
the basis for Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of both the liberal/capitalist version of Modernist rationality in his first political treatise (*Humanism and Terror*) and the authoritarian/communist version of Modernist rationality in his second political treatise (*Adventures of the Dialectic*). More positively, it is this multicultural version of rationality that will provide the basis for his new politics, a new liberalism and a non-communist left. I will attempt here to make this case in some detail.

It should also be mentioned here in the introduction that Merleau-Ponty’s stated intention for his linguistic studies is to more fully understand the relationship between perception and language, to more fully understand the sublimation of the perceptual *logos* in the structure of language that comes to be regarded as human reason. Thus his clearly stated research intention is to trace the connection between perception and language, not to leave perception behind for a new philosophy of language, as some have maintained. In fact, some have claimed even more, that the shift in Merleau-Ponty’s thought from perception to language results in two distant, and even two inconsistent, political tracts, one expressed in *Humanism and Terror* and one articulated in *Adventures of the Dialectic*. I will argue contrarily here that his linguistic studies, particularly *The Prose of the World* and “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” help Merleau-Ponty work out more thoroughly how perception is to be integrated with language, intersubjectivity, rationality, truth, history and politics. The linguistic studies help him refine his notion of multicultural rationality, not to leave one theory of rationality (based in perception) behind for another (based in language). The criticisms of Modernist rationality in *Humanism and Terror* and *Adventures of the Dialectic*, then, are primarily the same, and, even though his notion of a multicultural rationality is *developed*, with the help of the linguistic studies, it is not brand new. Again, I am not claiming that the linguistic studies do not reveal many new insights for Merleau-Ponty. They certainly do. I am claiming that the linguistic studies tend to integrate these insights into the main themes that he has already developed in his earlier philosophical works (*The Structure of Behavior* and *Phenomenology of Perception*), tend to integrate perception with language, and do not leave perception behind. The linguistic studies, again especially *The Prose of the World* and “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” with the help of the essay entitled
“Cezanne’s Doubt,”14 connect perceptual meaning/expression/rationality to artistic rationality, and then proceed to connect artistic rationality to linguistic and historical rationality, as I will attempt to show below.

The Introduction to Signs

Merleau-Ponty writes in 1960 that “our age calls for a philosophical interpretation,” or, more precisely, for a philosophical re-interpretation—in part making reference to the then century long shift away from Modernism: away from the Cartesian idea of the isolated self in complete possession of a rational interior, who, with Divine assistance, is in complete possession of the rational principles of both the natural and social world; away from the idea of a rational universe founded on and logically derived from indubitable first principles; away from the social contract theory of isolated individuals rationally calculating the maximization of their own pleasures; and away from the corresponding idea of an isolated political state that rationally calculates the fulfillment of its needs, etc. We now know, he says, that this whole Modernist “philosophy of the God-like survey was only an episode—and that it is over.” (Signs 14)

What can we now put in its place? Merleau-Ponty here sketches a brief answer, one that he has been developing and refining in great detail for at least twenty years. The sketch (which I will slightly embellish) can be enumerated as follows.

1.) “Now as before, philosophy begins with a ‘What is thinking?’ and is absorbed in the question to begin with. No instruments or organs here. It is a pure ‘It seems to me that.’”(Signs 14) Even though many Postmodernist authors have abandoned “epistemology,” since it supposedly presumes a Modernist subject, and have put the play of language in its place, they must still address the question “What is thinking?”, even if their answer is that it is only the play of language. Merleau-Ponty’s point here, contrary to the position held by most Postmodernists, is that neither human experience nor human knowledge can be accounted for without addressing human awareness. Even though he is troubled by the word “consciousness” because of its association with the Cartesian Modernism, and even though his last works are casting about for a replacement term, he does not jettison human
awareness. Human perceptual awareness, he says, is an original order of meaning. It cannot be reduced to nature in itself, to discrete bits of matter in external causal relationships, since the perceptual, always a gestalt structure, is a meaningful whole that is greater than, or qualitatively different from, the mere sum of its parts. Nor can it be conceived as a mere manifestation of conceptual relations that are the product of various mental faculties or instruments, since this ignores the concrete specificity and ambiguity of experience as well as the non-conceptual unity of the different senses. Nor can it be understood as pure self possession devoid of a body and its exterior, since human awareness is ek-stace, is the body’s openness upon and relationship to the world. While we may imagine (as Descartes did) a visual consciousness that hovers above the world, detached from the body, it is difficult to do so when we consider the body’s tactile experience. To touch (with the body, not with a detached mind) is to be touched from the outside. To touch is to be in the world and to be touched by it. Human experience, then, must be understood as the body’s lived-through active openness upon an exterior world. Moreover, since this awareness is primarily a pre-reflective act, it can never be fully grasped as an object, since the moment the reflective act occurs the pre-reflective slips away. A glimpse of the pre-reflective act is possible, for reflective awareness, after all, is connected to it, as its succeeding act, yet, full possession of it is not, since the pre-reflective always just temporally slips away from reflection. Questions regarding human knowledge must therefore begin with embodied human awareness, and they must begin with this awareness as a pre-reflective act.

2.) “But the first truth,” that we must recognize human awareness, “can only be a half-truth. There would be nothing if there were not the abyss of the self. But an abyss is not nothing; it has environs and edges.” As was just mentioned above, “one always thinks…in contact with something. Even the action of thinking is caught up in the push and shove of being”—including the push and shove of time, a dimension of being. Since the moments of time are not discrete units but overlap, blend into one another, and hold together, and since consciousness opens upon and fuses with time,
thoughts are able to overlap and hold together. “Time and thought are mutually entangled.” (Signs 14-15)

3.) “Along with time’s secret linkages, I learn those of the perceived world, its incompatible and simultaneous ‘faces.’” (Signs 15) Since I am aware that my consciousness opens to a temporal and spatial field that includes me, I am thus aware that my perspectives open to a world that includes other perspectives, other possible observation points. My specificity thus crosses over into a generality that crosses back into me. Thus, “whenever I try to understand myself the whole fabric of the perceptible world comes too, and with it come the others who are caught in it.” (Signs 15) Again, then, my perceptual experience opens upon an exterior world that includes me, the possibility of other perspectives, and, in addition, the possibility of other perceivers. Moreover, I do not see others as just a projection of my own interior, for there must first be something that occurs in their appearance that prompts this projection. And I do not or cannot literally think another person’s thoughts. This is impossible, even if we grant the universality of logical principles of thinking, for formal systems do not capture the unique richness of individual’s thought. Yet, I can still perceive other perceivers. As my perception actively gestures into and opens upon the world, I am able to perceive other perceivers as they likewise actively gesture into and open upon this same world.

“Vision sketches out what is accomplished by desire when it pushes two ‘thoughts’ out toward that line of fire between them, that blazing surface where they seek a fulfillment which will be identically the same for two of them, as the sensible world is for everyone.” (Signs 17)

4.) We have already seen above, we must not begin with thought, certainly not abstract thought, that language would then simply be a code for or a representation of. Rather, we must begin with active bodily perceptual interpretation, which is already a meaningful gesture, since it is the act that first creates the sign as sign, since it is the act that first takes scattered givens and pulls them together as a unified meaning. Linguistic gestures will thus have their roots in perception. They are suggested by perception, which is still open and ambiguous, yet they are needed to fold back upon perception in order to express it more precisely. Here we see that linguistic expression has it origins in the body’s perceptual encounter with the world, yet neither perceptual nor, especially, linguistic expressions
occur in social isolation. Both occur in social/historical contexts, that help determine the meaning perceived and expressed. Moreover, as cultural expressions become more abstract, meanings can be developed by “reorganizing things-said, affecting them with a new index of curvature, and binding them to a certain enhancement of meaning.” (Signs 19)

5.) Yet, even though language/abstract thought can say something new, “we know now that to find [the source of thought] we must seek beneath statements” in perception and in lived-through pre-reflective experience.16 This is especially true of Descartes famous statement “in order to think one must exist.” The meaning of this statement betrays it, for at the very moment that it refers to an articulated and thus expressed and formed thought, it should be considering the lived experience that helps create the unity of this thought--“for which the established meanings of things and ideas are only the clue.” We must then recognize that “Descartes’ spoken word is the gesture which reveals in each of us that fundamental thought. ‘Fundamental’ because it is not borne by anything, but not fundamental as if with it one reached a foundation upon which one ought to base oneself and stay. As a matter of principle, fundamental thought is bottomless. It is, if you wish, an abyss. This means that it is never with itself, that we find it next to or setting out from things thought, that it is an opening out—the other invisible extremity of the axis which connects us to ideas and things.” (Signs 21)

Again, this openness is not nothing, for “if it were ‘nothing,’ the difference between the nearby and the far (the contour lines of all existence) would be effaced before it. Dimensionality and opening would no longer make any sense.” “It would be better to speak of the ‘visible and the invisible,’ pointing out that they are not contradictory, than to speak of ‘being and nothingness.’ (Signs 21) This invisible is not an absolute invisible but the other side of the visible, and in at least three senses. First, the invisible is that which is implied in the visible, the side and back of the building as I perceive the front. It is also the lines of force that run between a perceptual foreground and its embodied background, lines that are formed as the embodied subject opens upon the world and interacts with it. And finally, the invisible is the openness of the embodied subject upon the world, the active awareness that can never be reflected upon and grasped fully as an object because this act must
always be presupposed. Here again the invisible is attached to the visible, for consciousness (the invisible) is embodied (and thus visible) openness upon the visible world around it. Was we have already seen above, we may well catch a glimpse of this act of awareness, since we are this openness that appears through the body, yet it can never be grasped as a fully revealed object, since its basic mode of existence is that of an act, an opening out. The human being, Merleau-Ponty says, is a two-dimensional being, an awareness that is embodied, an opening out that can be perceived from the outside, an interior that has an exterior. This interior and exterior overlap or cross into one another; the hand touches because it is touched, yet they never exactly coincide, since the lived and the reflective are, as we have seen, separated by the passage or spread of time.

6.) Philosophy, then, cannot place itself above the world in order to see the world as a manifestation of the abstract thought—as Modernists attempted to do. “It seeks contact with brute being, and in any case informs itself in the company of those who have never lost that contact.” (Signs 22) Again, philosophy must begin with the world as it is lived by embodied perceptual subjects. It must help us make sense of the world as we live it together, as we seek recognition within it, including within social, economic, cultural and linguistic institutions.

This brief presentation of Merleau-Ponty’s own brief presentation of his thought, written shortly before his death in 1961, and thus written near the end of his life, is, I believe, fundamentally consistent with his earlier philosophical studies, specifically with The Structure of Behavior and Phenomenology of Perception. I do not believe that any sort of break or significant shift away from perception and phenomenology toward language or ontology exists in the body of his work, or that this supposed shift results in two distinctly different and thus inconsistent political/historical treatises, as some have claimed. As already mentioned, the author himself states that it is part of his research plan to proceed to the study of expression and language in order to understand their proper connection to perception. “Knowledge and communication sublimate rather then suppress our incarnation,” and even more, the abstract concepts that come to be expressed in language “recaptures our corporeal existence and uses it to symbolize…” (PrP 6) Merleau-Ponty’s unique philosophy of the birth of
meaning in the body’s lived-through perceptual encounter with the world and others, of the sublimation of this meaning in the expressions of language, of the sublimation of the perceptual logos in the logos that comes to be expressed in the structure of language, is present and remains fundamentally consistent throughout the different periods of its development. Granted that there is development, this unique philosophy of perceptual rationality, of a rationality that is “grounded” in a lived-through embodied perception that always already opens upon a public world, remains consistent throughout the body of his work, as does the criticism of Modernist rationality that this perceptual rationality necessarily engenders. I now turn to the attempt to make this claim, that perceptual rationality is consistently sublimated by and remains the “ground” for linguistic rationality, in some detail. I will then turn my attention to the claim that this new philosophy, this non-Modernist understanding of rationality, is the basis for Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of both liberal and communist forms of Modernism, and is the basis for his own new liberalism and non-communist left.

Continuity of Merleau-Ponty’s Works

To make the case for the continuity of Merleau-Ponty’s works, to provide evidence for this interpretation, I here offer a number of relevant quotations.

1.) The “early” *Phenomenology of Perception* characterizes rationality as follows:

“To say that there exists rationality is to say that perspectives blend, perceptions confirm each other, a meaning emerges. But it should not be set in a realm apart, transposed into absolute Spirit, or into the world in the realist sense. The phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people’s interest and engage each other like gears. It is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity, which find their unity when I either take up my past experiences in those of the present, or other people’s in my own.” (PhP xix-xx)

2.) With respect to the relationship between perception and language (the means for the abstract expression of rationality) *Phenomenology of Perception* states:

“Visual contents are taken up, utilized and sublimated to the level of thought by a symbolical power which transcends them, but it is on the basis of sight that this power can be constituted. The relationship between matter and form is called in phenomenological terminology a relationship of Fundierung: the symbolical function rests on the visual as a ground” [—not as a cause but as a power to motivate]. (PhP 127) 17
*Phenomenology of Perception* thus expresses a phenomenological view of rationality, a perceptual *logos* that is sublimated in abstract thought by language.

3.) Next, in order of composition or publication, “Cezanne’s Doubt,” *The Prose of the World* and “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” will develop this view of rationality, not break with it. These texts will be dealt with in detail below. For now it is enough to point out that “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” is already largely present *The Prose of the World*, that *The Prose of the World* continues the earlier “Cezanne's Doubt” emphasis on the sublimation of perception by language, and that all three text mention perception as the primordial setting for language and thus for abstract reasoning. Language is connected to a perceptual encounter with the world that it sublimates. Thus there is no dramatic shift here in the linguistic studies from a philosophy focused solely on perception to a philosophy focused solely on language.

4.) Furthermore, the lecture entitled “The Sensible World and the World of Expression,” delivered at approximately the same time as the composition of *The Prose of the World* and “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” is in fundamental agreement with them and with *Phenomenology of Perception*, as the following statement makes clear.

“There is truly a reversal when one passes from the sensible world in which we are caught, to the world of expression, where we seek to capture significations to serve our purpose, although this reversal and the ‘retrogressive movement’ of the truth are sublimated by a perceptual anticipation. Properly speaking, the expression which language makes possible resumes and simplifies another expression which is revealed in the ‘archaeology of the perceived world.” (TFL 4) (Note)

Again, the abstract expression of truth in language is a sublimation of our perceptual encounter with the world that folds back upon it.

5.) And finally *The Visible and the Invisible*, composed in the years shortly before Merleau-Ponty’s death, states, also in agreement with *Phenomenology of Perception*, the following:

“…there is to be sure a question as to...how from the ideality of the [perceptual] horizon one passes to the ‘pure ideality’... But however we are to understand it, the ‘pure’ ideality already streams forth along the articulations of the aesthesiological body, along the contours of sensible things... (see VI 152-153; my bracket addition)

“When the silent vision falls into speech, and when the speech in turn, opening up a field of the...sayable, inscribes itself in the field,...this is in virtue of the same fundamental phenomenon of
reversibility which sustains both the mute perception and the speech and which manifests itself by an almost carnal existence of the idea, as well as the sublimation of the flesh.” (VI 155)

In both the earlier and later works, then, the relationship between perception and language is fundamentally the same: it is a Fundierung or chiasm relationship, whereby perception as an open, ambiguous field suggests the linguistic field that is needed to express it more fully. The linguistic field folds back upon it to help articulate it, but it returns to it what it largely barrowed from it in the first place. To make an additional point here, just as the earlier Phenomenology of Perception has argued that a word’s meaning is tied to how it is used in practical social context18, as well as to the body’s perceptual encounter with the world, the later studies of language tie a word’s meaning to the lateral relations of signs, to a subject’s use, in social context, of a diacritical language and, in addition, to the world these gestures finally refer to. (PW 102-3; ILVS 81) It is therefore not the case that the earlier works find the source of meaning (including the meaning of words) only in perception while the later works grant to language the creation of all meaning. Both periods discuss and recognize the importance of each. In both periods, the rationality that comes to be expressed in language has its roots in both the body’s perceptual encounter with the world and with this world in social context. And, finally, to make one last point with respect to this topic, Merleau-Ponty’s linguistic studies, following Saussure, do stress the notion of diacritical relationships, of signs and significations that are formed laterally, in relationships to other signs/significations. Yet, even this idea of diacritical relations is not new, at least not with respect to perception, since Merleau-Ponty’s appropriation of gestalt relations from Gestalt psychology, of the figure that makes sense only in relationship to a horizon or background, occurs early in his professional life. For Merleau-Ponty, then, in the development of his philosophy, we must see that the diacritical or gestalt relations of language confirm and sublimate the diacritical or gestalt relations already found in perception. Thus even the idea of an indirect ontology, developed in the linguistic studies, is already present (albeit in a nascent form) in Merleau-Ponty’s earlier work.19 It is already there in his embrace of the gestalt figure, with a figure that is presented with the help of an implied (indirect) background.
Overall, then, a non-Modernist notion of perceptual rationality that is sublimated in the more abstract *logos* of language is present in his earliest and latest writings, remains consistent throughout them, and, we will see, remains present in both *Humanism and Terror* and *Adventures of the Dialectic*, even though the Modernist rationality criticized in each of the political works has different face, one liberal/capitalist, and the other authorization/communist. It is thus not the case, as had been claimed,\(^{20}\) that “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” provides a new form of rationality/universality for *Adventures of the Dialectic*, one that is different from that used in *Humanism and Terror*. As we will see in more detail below, it is *The Prose of the World* and “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” help Merleau-Ponty refine, fill-in, and more fully articulate an already present perceptual rationality or *logos*, help him understand and trace the sublimation of a gestalt perceptual rationality in the diacritical rationality of language. They develop the *generality* (or even *universality*) that is already emerging in the body’s perceptual openness upon a public world. It is this non-Modernist philosophy of rationality that is the backdrop for Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Modernism in its many forms.

**“Cezanne’s Doubt”**

In his brief treatment of truth in “Cezanne’s Doubt” Merleau-Ponty continues to stress the birth of meaning in the body’s lived-through encounter with a really existing world. He points out that Cezanne wanted to depict matter as it spontaneously takes on form—and this as the body perceptually interacts with nature and eventually with language and thought.\(^{21}\) Furthermore, we see “Cezanne’s Doubt” develop the *Fundierung* relationship that was already presented in *Phenomenology of Perception*, the idea that cultural expressions are suggested by perception but fold back on perception to help voice it in a more precise, less ambiguous manner.

“Art is not imitation… It is a process of expressing. Just as the function of words is to name—that is, to grasp the nature of what appears to us in a confused way and to place it before us as a recognizable object—so it is up to the painter, said Gasquet, to ‘objectify,’ ‘project,’ and ‘arrest.’” “Forgetting the viscous, equivocal appearances, we go through them straight to the things they present. The painter recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things.” (SNS 17-18)
To adapt a metaphor used elsewhere by Merleau-Ponty, artistic and linguistic expression cast their nets into the sea of perception, not to find ready-made objects or thoughts, but to help articulate ambiguous, open, and only suggested patterns of meaning. Patterned meanings are offered by this sea of perception but it is the act of expression, artistic or linguistic, that helps bring these meanings to a more precise and articulated state. Moreover, for a meaning to take hold in a culture, it must be confirmed intersubjectively.

“There is nothing but a vague fever before the act of artistic expression, and only the work itself, completed and understood, is proof that there was something rather nothing to be said. Because he returns to the source of silent and solitary experience on which culture and exchange of ideas has been built in order to know it, the artist launches his work just as a man once launched the first word, not knowing whether it will be anything more than a shout, whether it can detach itself from the flow of individual life in which it originates and give the independent existence of an identifiable meaning either to the future of that same individual life or to the monads coexisting with it or to the open community of future monads. The meaning of what the artist is going to say does not exist anywhere—not in things, which as yet have no meaning, nor in the artist himself, in his unformulated life. It summons one away from the already constituted reason in which ‘cultured men’ are content to shut themselves, toward a reason which contains its own origins.” (SNS 19)

We have here a relationship of perception to expression that both suggests certain meanings and yet simultaneously requires creative interpretation. In addition, we have here a relationship of perception to expression that, if truth is to take hold culturally, requires their mutual influence. If the perceptions of my individual life are to mean anything to others, if they are to take hold culturally, then I must be able to articulate them using my society’s available means of intersubjective expression, and, in addition, they must be recognized and confirmed by others within this society. We see here, then, in “Cezanne’s Doubt” the further development of a theory of truth and intersubjectivity. We see here, and will see further developed further below, that the relationship between perception and expression can be used to understand the relationship between individual acts of expression and social/cultural institutions (such as art and language), and even between individuals and history. We will see that the present does not determine the future, i.e., that the future is neither already written in the present nor logically derived from it, as it appears to be for Modernists, but that the present is not nothing either, i.e., that its relationship to the future is not entirely a matter of conventional choice, as it is for at least
some Postmodernists. The present sketches a range of open ended possibilities and thus a range of choices. There is thus a *logos* or rationality to history, but it is not already written. It is suggested by the present, but it remains to be accomplished, and can be accomplished in a variety of ways. It is in *Humanism and Terror* that Merleau-Ponty more thoroughly develops this philosophy of intersubjectivity and history, that he begins to relate this newly developed notion of perceptual and artistic rationality to history and politics, as we will see below. Before we proceed to his politics, though, we should turn to his post war studies of language.

*The Prose of the World* and “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”23

Merleau-Ponty states in the posthumously published *The Prose of the World*, originally composed sometime in the early 1950s, and reminiscent of “Cezanne’s Doubt,” that painting and writing are comparable as acts of expression. (PW 47-48) Here in his first feature length linguistic study, he reveals his attempt to understand the connection of language to perception rather than to leave perception behind for abstract expression and thought, reveals his attempt to understand the sublimation of the perceptual *logos* in the *logos* of language. The exposition that follows will attempt to trace how Merleau-Ponty comes to understand this connection.

We have already briefly witnessed Merleau-Ponty’s protracted arguments against both materialism and idealism, and that it is the lived-through body’s encounter with the world that first produces meaning. He does not alter his position here. The synergy of the body and the world in lived-through experience that produces perceptual signification cannot be understood as either an objective event or as a conceptual one. The object does not cause the eyes to see it in a certain way, for the eyes must first adjust their convergence to bring the object into focus. Yet it is not the mind that determines the glance and the convergence of the eyes by anticipating the object to be seen, since this anticipation is lived and not known. It is the lived-through body itself that accomplishes the perception, that pulls together the dispersed elements into an organized meaningful whole or gestalt. Granted, the elements are already there, but their meaningful relationship to one another is recognized and accomplished by the perceiving body.
“All perception and all human action which presupposes it, in short every use of the human body, is already primordial expression. This means that perception is...the primary operation which first constitutes signs as signs. Perception makes what is expressed dwell in signs, not through some previous convention but through the eloquence of their very arrangement and configuration.” (PW 78; see also ILVS 67)

Before a sign takes on the intersubjective or universal value that language helps accomplish, before it refers to a socially standardized meaning, there must be a time when the sign actually frames or gives form to experience. This is what the painter is able to do, to bring the yet expressed to expression, to give form to that which was waiting for articulations. Yet the artist prolongs what is already begun by perception, for “perception already stylizes.” (PW 59; ILVS 54) Style, as Merleau-Ponty expresses it, is a certain way that we meet the world with our bodies and with the body’s perceptual functions.

When perceiving our environment, we relate scattered elements to form meaningful gestalt structures, with a foreground and a background. “Signification occurs where we subject the given elements of the world to a ‘coherent deformation’”—where each individual perceptually stylizes or organizes a common public world. Painting, says Merleau-Ponty, again reminiscent of “Cezanne’s Doubt,” is always about the perceptual world and amplifies orientations or structures or styles already there. (PW60-61; see also ILVS 54-55) The painter’s actions, then, assume and prolong, sometimes creatively, the stylizing actions of perception, and do so in a way reminiscent of the Fundierung relationship already discussed in Phenomenology of Perception.

To confirm his point, Merleau-Ponty appeals to Husserl’s use of the term Stiftung. “Husserl has used the fine word Stiftung—foundation, institution—...to designate that fecundity of the products of culture which continues to have value after their historical appearance and open a field of work beyond and the same as their own. It is thus that the world as soon as he has seen it, his first act of painting, and the whole past of painting create for the painter a tradition...” (PW 68; ILVS 59)

Artistic expression thus takes up the fertile tradition of perception to continue it but is able to create new forms by sublimation of expressions and significations that open the way toward a new future. Artists are able to do this by taking up their past in order to use it as a means to express. What the
artist lives can subsequently “become a signifying system.” What we all live can become a means to express. (PW 74-75; ILVS 64)

It is thus perception that helps create the possibility of both art and language, for it is perception that first organizes dispersed data into a meaningful whole, or more, into a meaning, a signification. It is perception that provides the means by which both an artistic or linguistic sign can refer to a meaning, provides the means by which signification can come to dwell in a sign. Moreover, even if the order of artistic/cultural creation is original, since it cannot be explained simply as an empirical event, it still is not independent of these events, for “cultural expression is ineffectual if it does not find a vehicle in external circumstances, [and] it can achieve nothing without them.” (PW 80-81; ILVS 68) Merleau-Ponty is not therefore suggesting (like Hegel) a separate spirit that manifests itself in cultural expressions. Rather, just as the body is able to integrate its behavior and its disparate parts to express a unified meaning, so, he argues, we may speak of a unified meaning or style that integrates the works of different artists in different epochs, and we may speak of the second because of the first. “It is the expressive operation of the body, begun in the least perception, which amplifies into painting and art.” (PW 83; ILVS 70) “The first sketch on the walls of a cave founded a tradition only because it gleaned from another—the tradition of perception.” (PW 83; ILVS 70) “It is through our body that we have the first experience of the impalpable body of history…” (PW 83; cf. ILVS 70)

We will be able to understand human history, the connection of human actions and expressions to one another, Merleau-Ponty says, “when the theory of perception makes the painter dwell once more in the visible world and once more lays bare the body as spontaneous expression.” (ILVS 65; cf. PW 76 24) Since artistic styles are similar in an artist, often regardless of medium or scale (painting or sculpture, standard or miniatures, for example), the human body, which accomplishes these acts, must possess a “general motor power” capable of making these transpositions. (ILVS 65; cf. PW 76) In addition, as we have just seen, just as the body is able to unify gestures within the artist, it is likewise able to unify, at least partially, the gestures of different artists. (PW 79; ILVS 68-69) Since all perception is already primordial expression, i.e., since all perceptual bodily gestures, including artistic
gestures, create a meaning, they are comparable at least in this general sense (PW 79; ILVS 68), and, as comparable, they can slip into one another and at least partially understand one another. It is therefore the lived-through unity of the human body that provides the basis for at least the possibility of the unity of both culture and history.

Merleau-Ponty thus far has favorably compared the gestures of painting and linguistic expression. He now proceeds to address their differences.

“Thus, when we compare language to mute forms of expression such as gestures or paintings, we must point out that unlike these forms language is not content to sketch out directions, vectors, a ‘coherent deformation’, or a tacit meaning on the surface of the world, exhausting itself as animal ‘intelligence’ does in kaleidoscopically producing a new landscape of action. Language is not just the replacement of one meaning by another, but the substitution of equivalent meanings. The new structure is given as already present in the old, the latter subsists in it, and the past is now understood.” (ILVS 81; cf. PW 104)

Language thus involves both a higher level of abstraction and integration, since it takes up the mute world of perception and attempts to move beyond it. In an attempt to clarify this mute experience in human beings, and eventually its relationships to language, Merleau-Ponty momentarily compares it to the mute perception experienced by the chimpanzee. We see in the chimpanzee, he says, a more extreme example of mute meaning, a meaning that is lived perceptually and not known intellectually. The chimpanzee is engaged in the world through its bodily desires, and the only thing that can break into this circuit of engagement is something that has both a perceptual content and a practical value for the animal. If, for example, the animal is able to perceive a stick lying on the ground, stretching from its enclosure to nearby food, it will use the stick as a tool to obtain the food. Yet if the stick is placed inside the enclosure, with no visual reference to the food beyond, it will not occur to the animal to use the stick as a devise to retrieve the food. The chimpanzee thus sees its surroundings one way at a time, depending upon its circumstances and how objects tend to function within these circumstances. (PW 103-104; see also SB 114-118) Humans, however, are able to vary perspectives quite freely, and do so in ways that are relatively independent of the immediate task at hand. Human beings have the capacity to vary perspectives, to abstract from them, and to form general meanings—while chimpanzees do not. Likewise, the significations developed by the human use of language seem
to be able to gain some independence from the specificity of immediate experiences in order to form more general meanings. For example, when I try to calculate the area of a parallelogram, I may first posit that it can be seen as two triangles, yet from this structure I am able to derive what is needed for the calculation, the combined area of the triangles. Seeing the parallelogram as a combination of two triangles does not displace or negate the properties of the parallelogram. Again, “this is not just a substitution of one [specific] meaning for another but a substitution of equivalent meanings, in which the new structure is latent in the old one while remaining present in the new. The past is not simply surpassed, it is understood…” (PW 104ff; my bracket addition) With the development of knowledge, then, by looking back at the specifics of the past, we are able to trace a line of development, generalization, and, finally, understanding. Moreover, since Merleau-Ponty does not believe that knowledge and abstract thought can occur without language, and since, subsequently, the development of knowledge is the development of language, the power to integrate the specifics of the past into the more generalized present is a characteristic shared by both. Language, at least certain uses of it, like knowledge, (or, really, at one with knowledge) takes up its past and its parts and is able to re-integrate them in new ways. With regard to their relationship to the past, then, painting and language are almost opposites, for while painting can reveal the charm of the past, it cannot integrate the past into the present in the way that language is able to do. (PW 101-102) Thus the significations of language are not just tied to specifics but can abstract from them to express common or general meanings. They can express a meaning that supersedes the specifics and yet that includes them. Thus while language displays the ability to integrate specific meanings into more general orientations, both perception and painting remain content with tracing new forms “on the surface of the world.”

However, even though human beings have the capacity to take up multiple perspectives and to grasp a general meaning, human thought is not formed outside all human situations. Even the abstract language of geometry relies on a field of meaning already established or established with respect to another tradition. Galileo was able to unify the phenomena of acceleration and deceleration under one concept, giving the impression that he discovered an essence whose variations simply appear as
examples of it. “But this signification [i.e., the essence] can in principle appear only through the concrete shapes which it unifies. That it appears to us on the basis of ‘particular cases’ is not an accident of its genesis with no essential effect. The signification is inscribed in its content, and if we tried to abstract the signification from the circumstances in which it appears, the signification would vanish before our eyes. The latter is not so much a signification over and above the facts which signify it as our means of passing from one fact to another or the trace of their intellectual generations.” This general truth or essence does not lie behind the particular cases the way reality remains behind appearances. The essence in this case would not generate new significations, for new significations will have a truth only insofar as we can experience them. (PW 105; my bracket addition) Merleau-Ponty illustrates this point with the following example:

“When Gauss remarks that the sum of the N prime numbers is equal to N/2 partial sums, so that is equal to N+1, and concludes with the formula N/2 (N+1) which applies to a whole series of numbers, what convinces him that he has found the essence and truth is that from this series he can see the derivation of the constant values he will reckon instead of calculating them.” (PW 105-106)

A story often retold about Gauss is that one of his childhood teachers instructed the class to add all the numbers from 1 to 100, one at a time, in sequence, as follows 1+2+3+4…99+100. The young Gauss, it is said, found a shorthand way to this long and tedious assignment, and did so rather quickly. As he played with different ways to arrange and calculate the numbers, he tried beginning with 1 and counting upward to 50, as well as beginning at 100 and counting downward to 51. When these lines were placed together as in illustration 1) below, he noticed that each column of numbers, when added together, produced the sum of 101, as in illustration 2) below.

Illustration 1) 1 + 2+ 3+…49+ 50
100 +99+ 98+…52+ 51

Illustration 2) 1 + 2+ 3+…49+ 50
100 +99+ 98+…52+ 51
101 101 101

Since there were 50 columns, the multiplication of 101 by 50 produced the sum of 5050, the same total achieved by the addition of each number to all the others in the one by one sequence requested by his teacher. Gauss’s insight produced the following formula: the sum of the N numbers in sequence is equal to N/2 (N+1).25
This story illustrates what Merleau-Ponty’s is claiming here: that “Gauss can see the derivation of constant values he will reckon instead of calculating their sum.” From the context here we can determine that Merleau-Ponty means two things by the word “see.” First, that abstract calculations are meaningful because we can both visually see and at some point intuitively grasp (or mentally see, as in second illustration above) the outcome of the calculations. And secondly, that abstract formulas are meaningful because, at least at some point, they refer back to the perceptual world. I know, for example, that 3x3=9 because at some point I have seen a group of 3 things added to 3 things 3 times. Obviously the human ability to think abstractly allows us to calculate very large numbers, and to do so without seeing the actual things that these numbers represent. We can multiply 3242x5546 and arrive at the sum 17980132, for example, without having to see what these numbers represent, such as people, cars, plants or animals. Merleau-Ponty thus does not deny the role of abstract thought and even a degree of autonomy to the calculations of the algorithm, since derived formulas can go straight to their own results without appealing, once again, to the intermediary steps that allowed their derivation. However, to be meaningful, at some point, these formulas must relate back to the world that we perceive. “Thus nothing limits our power to formalize, that is, to construct increasingly general expressions of the same fact. But however far one proceeds with formalization, its signification remains in suspension, actually means nothing, and has no truth at all unless we refer its superstructures back to a visible object. To signify, to signify something as a decisive act, is therefore accomplished only when that something’s constructions are applied to the perceived as the source of signification or expression.” (PW 106; see also PhP 384ff and VI 149ff, discussed below) Language, then, means little or nothing if it does not refer back to our perceived world.

However, Merleau-Ponty immediately proceeds to qualify this point. “The perceived object, with its viscous significations, has a twofold relation to what is understood. On the one hand, it is only the sketch or fragment of meaning which calls for a repetition that fixes the perceived object and finally makes it exist. On the other, the perceived object is the prototype of meaning and alone accomplishes the actual truth of what is understood. To be sure, if we are to understand the sensible as quality, it must contain everything we think, although almost nothing in human perception is entirely sensible, since the sensible is indiscernible. But there is also nothing that we can actually and effectively think without relating it to our field of presence, to the actual
existence of the perceived object—and in this sense the field of presence contains everything.” (PW 106-107)

Merleau-Ponty articulates these points even more explicitly in his 1952-1953 lecture “The Sensible World and the World of Expression,” where he claims that, since perception must be understood as a gestalt field with fluid foregrounds and open ended horizons, it would be just as absurd to attempt to reduce everything to perception as it would be to make perception the result of an ideal conceptual system that is completely independent of it. In this lecture he also claims, reminiscent of “Cezanne’s Doubt” and the Fundierung relationship discussed in Phenomenology of Perception, and prescient of the chiasm phenomenon to be discussed in The Visible and the Invisible, that language is needed to more fully articulate the perceived but that language reflects back to perception a sense and a light that are borrowed from it. In addition, returning to The Prose of the World, the author adds a second qualifying point, one that he refers to as the paradox of expression. If, he says, speech and language seek to express life too clearly in thought, if they focus too much on thought as abstract formulas, as Modernist rationality attempted to do, then they will leave too much behind. What the philosopher must attempt to understand, as we have seen, is the crossing into one another of the lived and the known. Yet, in addition to this chiasm of the lived and the known, of perception and language, Merleau-Ponty here adds that philosophy must also be sensitive to the crossing into one another of the anonymity of the perceptual world and language, on the one side, and personal life on the other. “With respect to language, philosophy can only point out how, by the ‘coherent deformation’ of gestures and sounds, man manages to speak an anonymous language and, through the ‘coherent deformation’ of this language, to express what existed only for him.” (PW 113) It is not the case, then, that perception is only personal and that language alone accomplishes the interpersonal—and thus the possibility of rationality. Perception, as the body’s ek-stace or openness upon the world, is always already both personal and public, both individual and general, both mine and anonymous. (See PhP 83-84, 448) As Merleau-Ponty states in the 1952 Prospectus of his work, the subject’s experience of space, i.e., the subject’s perspective with respect to it, opens inherently to other
perspectives that include it and refer back to it. This, he points out, allows us to understand the simple act of pointing, which animals do not understand, since it refers to possible positions, and thus to a sort of situated generality, to a generality that moves beyond a specific situation but remains rooted in situations. And again, this pointing or “mimic usage of our body is not yet a conception, since it does not cut us off from our corporeal situation; on the contrary, it assumes all its meaning. It leads us to a concrete theory of the mind which will show the mind in a relationship of reciprocal exchange with the instruments which it uses, but uses only while rendering to them what it has received from them, and more.” (PrP 6) This generality that is already found in perceptual experience is what allows Merleau-Ponty to state already in *Phenomenology of Perception* that perception is rationality, is the agreement or blending of perspectives, both individual and intersubjective, to state already that perceptual rationality is inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Language certainly helps more fully achieve and articulate rational agreement, but it is built upon and sublimates the rationality already found present in perception. What we have seen here in *The Prose of the World* and “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” is the development of the idea of the sublimation of perception in language, the sublimation of the perceptual *logos* in the *logos* of language. The perceptual *logos* gives rise to the *logos* of language, which in turn folds back upon the perceived to help express it more fully, but also to integrate it and express it more abstractly. Yet, again, the rational structure, its generality, its universality, its intersubjectivity are not created *ex nihilo* by language. Language helps with their expression, helps with their more complete achievement, not with their original creation. In this important sense, then, there is no fundamental change in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy: perceptual expressions cross (*Fundierung* or chiasm) into linguistic expressions that fold back upon these perceptions to help stabilize them, yet perception still remains the primary term, for language would mean little without it. What we have found in the earlier philosophical *Phenomenology of Perception* we also find developed and expressed here in *The Prose of the World*.

What we have learned from the study of language, then, is that human beings, as embodied, sensuous subjects, live in specific natural and social situations that we are sensitive to, and that we are
able to take up, respond to, and express these situations. The human being, through the human body and its ability to express, is sensitive to the patterns and variegations of the environment and is able to express them in gestures and vocalizations. Or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “what we have to say is only the excess of what we live over what has already been said. We set up our abode with our linguistic apparatus in a certain situation of knowledge and history to which that apparatus is sensitive, and our pronouncements are only the final balance of these exchanges.” (PW 112; cf. ILVS 83) With a preview of political studies to come, *The Prose of the World* here proceeds to state that even the pronouncements of politics follow this same path of expression. For political thought “is always the elucidation of historical perception in which all our understandings, all our experiences and all our values simultaneously come into play—and of which our theses are only the schematic formation.” (PW 112; ILVS 83) If political thought remains abstract and aloof, if it does not connect with the human world as it is lived by whole human beings, then it will remain empty and ineffective. And, in addition, if our historical knowledge is too abstract, if we aim too consciously at historical goals reflectively conceived, then we suppress what is lived for what is known. Contrarily, if we live our lives and our history, then, the meaning of our lives and events will help give rise to conceptual frameworks that are meaningfully and understandable, as long as they are not frozen into formulas or algorithms that forget their origins. Even this understanding, though, will never be anything more than partial, for our conceptual understanding always exists at the center of a social/historical context which it relies upon for its clarity and, yet, which it cannot fully grasp.

Now, given this new view of rationality, of a perceptual *logos* sublimated in the *logos* of language, and given its rejection of the Modernist philosophical tradition, what else can we say about politics/history? Merleau-Ponty helps us with this task in his two political/historical treatises, *Humanism and Terror* and *Adventures of the Dialectic*, published in 1947 and 1955 respectively. The first criticizes liberalism’s version of Modernism and the second criticizes communism’s version of it. Both criticisms are drawn from a new philosophy that Merleau-Ponty had spent his professional life developing, from a perceptual rationality that is sublimated in language,
Humanism and Terror

As already mentioned, Merleau-Ponty’s two political treatises Humanism and Terror and Adventures of the Dialectic are sometimes presented as representing two distinct political perspectives, based, supposedly, on two different philosophical orientations. In fact, an essay by Kerry Whiteside displays these perspectives in his analysis of the two texts. The essay claims that Humanism and Terror attacks liberalism's pre-established rationality as a means to establish political/ethical universality. In this earlier treatise, though, Merleau-Ponty does accept Marx’s idea of the realization of liberalism’s universality by the proletariat in a classless society. The later Adventures of the Dialectic however breaks with this earlier defense of communist universality and attacks communism on the same grounds the earlier work attacked liberalism. It attacks communism’s pre-established rationality/universality, which is placed in the material conditions of history, material conditions that are mirrored by party officials who are supposedly in possession of what is taken to be the necessary truths of history. It even expresses a new form of universality, Whiteside claims, one that is developed by Merleau-Ponty in his post war linguistic studies.

While it certainly must be admitted that this interpretation is correct: that Humanism and Terror calls into question liberalism’s pre-established reason as the means to attain universal agreement, and that Merleau-Ponty here agrees with Marx’s claim that the universal will be attained by the proletarian class—which will establish a classless society, i.e., the universal “recognition of man by man”— the exposition that follows will emphasize something different. Even here in the earlier political treatise, Merleau-Ponty takes the universal as only lateral, as partial and as admitting differences, for the classless society minimizes conflict and violence but will never eliminate them. Universal agreement will never be attained but only approached. In fact, Humanism and Terror ends with what could be called, in more contemporary language, a multicultural perspective, a perspective that admits that there is conflict between individuals and between groups but that attempts to minimize this conflict by moving toward a common ground through open and democratic debate. (HT 187-189) We have seen that Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical writings have already paved the way for
this multicultural rationality. We have seen that truth and rationality are not already established, as the Modernist tradition has maintained, and that they remain to be established as an ongoing agreement of perspectives or profiles. We will see that the political implication of this notion of phenomenological rationality will be further developed in *Adventures of the Dialectic*. It will continue the theme of an ongoing phenomenological rationality (based in perception) that we find already present in the earlier philosophical, in the studies of language, and in *Humanism and Terror*. In this important sense, then, *Adventures of the Dialectic* will maintain and develop the earlier view of rationality, as well as the criticism of Modernist rationality that it implies, not break with it in order to offer something completely new. Even if we admit, as we must, that Merleau-Ponty’s linguistic studies influence the arguments presented in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, the linguistic studies of the later works, and the linguistic *logos* that they articulate, must be seen as consistent with the perceptual *logos* that is first formed in the earlier perceptual studies. It is therefore more accurate to say that the later works do not find a new form of universality but more fully develop the phenomenological rationality that is already present in the earlier works. Let us now turn to the political treatises.

One of the main themes of *Humanism and Terror* is the terror that results from the social conflicts that lead to violence. In this text, Merleau-Ponty argues that Marx must be understood as focusing on human struggle as the driving force of history. Merleau-Ponty expresses Marx’s view this way: “What accounts for there being human history is that man is a being who externalizes himself, who individualizes himself by appropriating certain goods and thereby enters into conflict with other men.” (HT 102) The effort to survive by appropriating nature necessarily brings with it a certain degree of conflict, since it occurs in a public space with a scarcity of consumable goods. For Marx, then, human history must be understood as a history of this conflict and, more specifically, it must be regarded as the conflict between groups or classes for material goods and social services.

Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Marx leads him to say that to the extent that Marxism recognizes the presence of struggle in human relationships, it recognizes “violence and terror” as an ever present part of human history. Furthermore, if Modernist rationality is the expression of class
ideology, as Marx claimed, there is little hope of arriving at a universal ethics by Kantian means, by a
good will that is rationally universalizable, for this rationalism represents the interests of only one
class. (HT 103) Moreover, these comments allow us to understand the social/political conflict with
which Merleau-Ponty opens *Humanism and Terror*. It is a mid 20th Century, cold war conflict
perceived and subsequently articulated by the capitalist democracies of the West, with the claim that
the West stands for “respect for law, truth, and individual consciousness,” while communism stands
for “deception and violence.” Merleau-Ponty critically responds to this claim by reminding the reader
that Marx wrote long ago that we should not judge democracies by what they *say* their morality is, by
their stated principles, but by the actual relations between the people within their societies. (HT xiii-
xiv) In Western capitalist democracies deception and violence “are the substance of foreign and
colonial politics and even of domestic politics. Respect for law and liberty has served to justify police
suppression of strikes in America; today it serves to justify military suppression” and economic
exploitation in the Third World. Thus, the West’s “purity of principles not only tolerates but even
requires violence.” (HT xiii)

The ethical conclusion Merleau-Ponty draws from this is that it is not a matter of choosing
between violence and nonviolence. “Inasmuch as we are incarnate beings,” engaged in the world,
trying to survive there and competing with others to do so, then “violence is our lot.” (HT 109)
“Violence is the common origin of all regimes. Life, discussion, and political choice occur only
against a background of violence. What matters and what we have to discuss is not violence but its
sense or its future.” (HT 109) The question is, then, given the situation of conflict and violence, how
do we move toward a future that is less conflictual and more humane?

First of all, for Marx, proletarian violence is justified by their living conditions within capitalist
societies, by the conditions of exploitation, poverty, and by political and violent suppression. (HT
112) Marx subsequently thinks the driving force of history is “a condition considered human by all
men, namely, the condition of the proletariat.” (HT 111) According to Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation
of Marx, then, history and “the proletariat...[are moving] toward the recognition of man by man.” (HT
To accept Marx’s view of history, then, is to accept that society is a gestalt, is “...a holistic system moving toward a state of equilibrium, the classless society which cannot be achieved without individual effort and action, but which is outlined in the present crisis as their solution—the power of men over nature and mutual reconciliation of men.” (HT 130) Marx’s solution, then, to the natural state of human conflict is that the proletariat will establish the universal “recognition man by man,” of each human being by all the others. (HT 147)

At this point in Humanism and Terror Merleau-Ponty begins a more critical analysis of Marx, for he notes that the social world of 1940s looks quite different from the social world of 1850s. The social and economic structures of the 1940s no longer easily fit the class concepts and categories developed by Marx’s 100 years earlier. (HT 150) Yet, Merleau-Ponty admits, even though many alternative philosophies of history have been developed, their primary goal remained the control of human beings, not the recognition of each human being by all the others, and it is for this reason that he still sides with Marx. As long as there is a proletariat, there is exploitation and even enslavement, he says. As long as there is a proletariat, the mutual recognition of human beings by each other remains “a dream.” (HT 155) “Perhaps no proletariat will arise to play the historical role accorded to the proletariat in the Marxist system. Perhaps a universal class will never emerge, but it is clear that no other class can replace the proletariat in this task. Outside Marxism there is only the power of a few and the resignation of the rest.” (HT 156) Merleau-Ponty is clearly skeptical here about the realization of history by the proletariat, yet in this early political treatise he sees no alternative to Marxism and he remains hopeful that Marxism will move toward a classless society and the minimization of conflict and violence. Merleau-Ponty does not expect a complete elimination of conflict and violence; this is utopia. What he agrees with here is Marx’s idea of the move toward a classless society and thus the social reduction of conflict, the minimization of violence, not their complete elimination, and he proceeds to sketch one of the very first expressions of multiculturalism. He sketches a multicultural approach that seeks to take all perspectives into account, and that attempts to move toward harmony and agreement without naively ignoring human self-interest and
disagreement. Merleau-Ponty’s expression is worth repeating.

“It does not show much love for reason to define it in such a way that it is the privilege of a Western elite released of all responsibility toward the rest of the world and in particular of the duty to understand the variety of historical situations. To seek harmony with ourselves and others, in a word, truth, not only in a priori reflection and solitary thought but through the experience of concrete situations and in a living dialog with others apart from which internal evidence cannot validate its universal right, is the exact contrary of irrationalism, since it accepts our incoherence and conflict with others as constants but assumes we are able to minimize them. It rules out the inevitability of reason as well as that of chaos. It is not that it is in favor of the conflict of opinions so much as it assumes such conflict from the very start. How could it do otherwise?” (HT 187)

Thus, while abandoning an already established elitist Western rationality, and while fully recognizing the existence of conflict in human affairs, Merleau-Ponty states that these conflicts can at least be partially overcome, and he proceeds to qualify his claim.

“Doubt and disagreement are facts, but so is the strange pretension we all have of thinking the truth, our capacity for taking the other’s position to judge ourselves, our need to have our opinions recognized by him and to justify our choices before him—in short the experience of the other person as an alter ego in the very course of discussion. The human world is an open or unfinished system and the same radical contingency which threatens it with discord also rescues it from the inevitability of disorder and prevents us from despairing of it, providing only that one remembers its various machinery are actually men and tries to maintain and expand man’s relation to man.” (HT 188)

Humans have the capacity to take up the view of the other, to recognize perspectives other than their own, yet, even more, humans often display the need to have their own choices and beliefs confirmed by others. What we see Merleau-Ponty expressing succinctly here in just a few brief sentences, and what we have seen developed in his preceding works, is a broadened view of rationality, one that seeks confirmation and evidence in open dialog and not in a rationality already confirmed by a few.

In fact, the progressive movement of politics is the movement toward greater inclusion in the dialog that leads to political and economic choice and therefore toward a greater recognition of each human being by all the others. Moreover, if we want to properly understand both the function of rationality and the movement of history, then, we must more fully understand the intersection of human beings with each other and nature as they strive to gain recognition within social and natural contexts. This intersection is what is touched upon in *Humanism and Terror*, and it is this intersection that Merleau-Ponty has already defined as a phenomenological rationality in *Phenomenology of Perception*. It is a more complete understanding of the political aspects of this intersection that Merleau-Ponty seeks
with the development of his dialectical method in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, with a method that was profoundly influenced by his already articulated philosophy of perceptual rationality, as well as by his post World War II studies of language. Since we have already considered the philosophical and linguistic studies, let us now turn to *Adventures of the Dialectic*.

*Adventures of the Dialectic*

While it is true, as we have seen Whiteside claim above, that Merleau-Ponty’s more mature political study, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, criticizes communism on the same grounds that the earlier study, *Humanism and Terror*, criticizes liberalism—for its adherence to a pre-established rationality—and that it departs from the earlier work’s agreement with the notion of a realization of universal recognition in a classless society, the following exposition will again emphasize something else. It will not emphasize, or even accept, the mature work’s “break” with the earlier text, but stress the continuity between the two texts. For in the later work Merleau-Ponty returns to the earlier multicultural view of political rationality and develops it in greater detail. As we have already witnessed, in both the earlier philosophical and linguistic studies, for Merleau-Ponty, rationality, truth, and history occur at the intersection of embodied consciousnesses, where human beings interact with each other and nature. We have already seen that reason is a contingent blending of embodied perspectives, that there is no pre-established reason in the realm of ideas (Plato), in the minds of rational individuals (Kant and Kantian liberalism) or in nature (materialism). Reason always remains to be established, always remains to be worked out, and it always occurs against a background of chaos, irrationality and difference of opinion. Merleau-Ponty holds this view even in the earlier *Humanism and Terror* (as well as in his earlier philosophical and linguistic studies) and develops it more thoroughly in *Adventures of the Dialectic* (and his later philosophical works). In *Adventures of the Dialectic* he attacks the reductionistic materialism of the mature Marx and Soviet Marxism, as well as the authoritarian politics it leads to, for this reductionism no longer sees history as the relationship between persons mediated by things, but only as immanent in the rational movement of things. In opposition to this reductionistic materialism, and in agreement with the young Marx,
Merleau-Ponty will focus on the relationship between persons mediated by things and social institutions, including language, as the means to understanding society and the movement of history. It is an approach that Merleau-Ponty grounds in the human body, in the human body’s aware openness upon a public world, a public world from which persons individuate, yet within which they interact for common goals. It is an approach that Merleau-Ponty calls dialectics in his late political treatises and is primarily what he has already developed as a perceptual logos in his earlier philosophical works and refined in his post war studies of language.

The following exposition will therefore attempt to trace Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of intersubjectivity, that is, the relations between people mediated by things and social institutions, through Adventures of the Dialectic, will attempt to briefly show how Merleau-Ponty’s dialectic relates to his discussion of rationality in his earlier work, including those on language, since it is these studies that help him refine his dialectic, that help him see more completely the diacritical structure of perception, language, and human relationships, including political relationships. We have seen, and will see below, even though Merleau-Ponty rejects the Modernist “rational man,” he does not jettison the subject in order to place historical movement in social institutions alone, be they economic, political, or linguistic. History, insofar as it is made, is made by aware human beings who intersect with, and help create, these institutions. The experience of aware individuals crosses into various cultural and social institutions including those of language. The experience of aware individuals and social institutions thus exist in dialectical relationships with one another. They mutually define one another, yet, as we have already seen, and as we will see, it is active bodily perception and lived through experience, praxis in the broadest possible sense, that remains primary in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of history. It is clear, however, that Merleau-Ponty’s linguistic works develop the role that language plays in the attempt to understand human experience, intersubjectivity and history. Special attention will thus be paid to this role.

In his inaugural lecture at the College de France in 1952, Merleau-Ponty makes the surprising claim that the works of Saussure provide a better model for the understanding of history than either of
the masters of the philosophy of history, Hegel or Marx. What Merleau-Ponty finds so valuable in Saussure’s linguistic theory is a means to once again overcome the subject/object dichotomy. He thus regards Saussure’s work as consistent with and confirming his earlier philosophical studies, and as here being applicable to history and politics. Instead of trying to understand history as a Modernist manifestation of a reason, as Hegel does, or instead of trying to understand history as the Modernist rational outcome of material forces and economic conditions, as Marx’s attempts to do, Saussure’s linguistic theory provides the means to understand the social as a set of stable institutions that cross into the lives of individuals and fuses with them. Merleau-Ponty expresses his view in the following two passages, the first, taking up Saussure’s theory of signs, the second relating language as a social institution to social institutions in general.

“The theory of signs, as developed in linguistics, perhaps implies a conception of historical meaning which gets beyond the opposition of things versus consciousness. Living language is precisely that togetherness of thinking and thing which causes the difficulty. In the act of speaking, the subject, in his tone and in his style, bears witness to his autonomy, since nothing is more proper to him, and yet at the same moment, and without contradiction, he is turned towards the linguistic community and is dependent on his language. The will to speak is one and the same as the will to be understood. The presence of the individual in the institution, and of the institution in the individual is evident in the case of linguistic exchange.” (IPP 54-55)

“The reciprocal relations between the will to express and the means of expression correspond to those between the productive forces and the forms of production, and more generally, between historical forces and institutions. Just as language is a system of signs which have meaning only in relation to one another, and each of which has its own usage throughout the whole language, so each institution is a symbolic system that the subject takes over and incorporates as a style of functioning, as a global configuration, without have the need to conceive it all. When equilibrium is destroyed, the reorganizations which take place comprise, like those of language, an internal logic even though it may not be clearly thought out by anyone. They are polarized by the fact that, as participants in a system of symbols, we exist in the eyes of another, with one another, in such a way that changes in language are due to our will to speak and to be understood.” (IPP 55-56)

Just as perception is an intersubjective (intercorporeal) phenomenon that comingles with the subjective experience of the individual, and defines perceptual rationality, so also language is an intersubjective phenomenon that comingles with the expressive life of the individual and helps define historical and conceptual rationality. And just as language is an intersubjective phenomenon that crosses into the life of the individual that the individual can take up and use for his or her own purposes, so also social institutions are regulated means of interaction that individuals can take up to
attempt to express their own will. Moreover, just as language can be used without understanding the
linguistic system in its entirety, so also social institutions, governed by rules expressed in language,
can be used and manipulated without grasping their structure as a whole. It is with these insights that
Merleau-Ponty will undertake the study of intersubjectivity and politics in his 1955 Adventures of the
Dialectic. His earlier political treatise Humanism and Terror, published in 1947, does not yet reflect
the insights that he gleaned from his linguistic studies of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Yet both
political works rest upon the same perceptual multicultural rationality and both criticize a version of
Modernist rationality, albeit different versions. The difference between the texts will be discussed
below. For now let us turn to a consideration of their similarity by considering an exposition of
Adventures of the Dialectic.

We should begin at the beginning, with a consideration of the first chapter of Adventures of the
Dialectic, on Max Weber, which picks up where Humanism and Terror leaves off: with a discussion
of violence, of the partial and provisional nature of human knowledge, and of the multicultural nature
of human reasoning. Merleau-Ponty thinks that for Weber “truth and freedom cannot exist without
strife [because in Weber’s work both truth and freedom]...legitimize their adversaries and...confront
them.” (AD 9) For Weber both truth and freedom occur only in certain societies and only under
certain economic and cultural conditions. He is therefore aware of their historical dependency. In the
case of knowledge, since it is a part of the natural and social world and moves with them, it can never
totally assimilate these worlds. Since knowledge is not absolute, since it must be worked out in
experience with others, it opens to the perspectives of others and thus to possible conflict. (AD 9)
Therefore “Weber thinks it is possible to juxtapose the order of truth and violence.” (AD 9) Merleau-
Ponty admires Weber’s honest recognition of the possible connection between freedom, knowledge
and violence, as well as his faithfulness to the pursuit of truth. “Because he remains faithful to
knowledge and the spirit of investigation, Weber was a liberal. His liberalism is brand new, because
he admits truth leaves a margin of doubt...” “Contrary to previous liberalism, it does not ingenuously
consider itself to be the law of things...” (AD 9) “Weber’s liberalism does not...consider the formal universe of democracy to be absolute; he admits all politics is violence—even democratic politics. It recognizes the rights of its adversaries, refuses to hate them, does not try to avoid them, and in order to refute them, relies only upon their own contradictions and upon discussions which expose these.” (AD 26)

Merleau-Ponty’s summary articulation here of Weber’s position is similar to the multicultural perspective with which Merleau-Ponty completes Humanism and Terror, with the intervening studies of language confirming even more for Adventures of the Dialectic that rationality is not independent of the sublimation of perceptual experience in language. Thought is necessarily tied to language and the lived-through experience of human subjects and is thus necessarily tied to a multiplicity of different and historically moving perspectives. In both texts, then, there is no pre-established truth or rationality that will someday bring about universal agreement and harmony—that can subsequently be used to justify the violence against all those who disagree. Truth and rationality occur at the juncture of people interacting with each other and things; and since differences remain, conflict and even violence remain ever present possibilities. In a sense, then, rationality always remains to be established, and it is to be established by taking all perspectives into account, by listening to all voices. What Merleau-Ponty therefore agrees with in Weber’s system is its rejection of liberalism’s pre-established reason and his first tentative expressions of a multicultural perspective, a knowledge that takes shape in the unfolding relationship between persons and between persons and things.

In addition, Merleau-Ponty finds Weber moving away from Marx’s economic determinism and toward a less reductionistic, more holistic method for the understanding of society and human history. Merleau-Ponty thinks Weber’s method at least begins to take all aspects of society into account, that religious and legal institutions are taken into account as seriously as the economic conditions of a society.
“there is...a religious efficacy and an economic efficacy. Weber describes them as interwoven, exchanging positions so that now one, now the other, plays the role of tutor. The effect turns back on its cause, carrying and transforming it in its turn.” (AD 16)

Merleau-Ponty’s reading of Weber’s method here is a reading that clearly reflects his own earlier philosophical and linguistic studies, that sees all the dimensions of society crossing into one another, that sees, for example, religion and ideology (expressed in language) folding back on and taking a hold of economic practices, just as these practices support and give rise to certain ideological (and linguistic) structures. History is thus driven by neither economics conditions nor rational formulas alone. It moves because all the sectors of society cross into one another, sometimes with one leading and another following, and sometimes vice versa. For Merleau-Ponty, as for Weber, this is not just a reciprocal causality of separate parts. There is a single, contingent fabric into which these elements are woven, where they cross and blend, where they take shape and form a recognizable structure. This fabric is a third region between pure matter and pure consciousness, it is the intersubjective region of praxis, it is the region of people interacting with each other and things, using language to express their respective views of the world in order to gain recognition for and hopefully fulfillment of their needs and interests.

Furthermore, since history is contingent, since it is not driven by some abstract and pre-established rationality, the rationality of history remains to be formed. It is not already written. We therefore never quite know where it is going and only grasp its “rationality” (its style or pattern of development) by looking back from the present to its point of departure. History, according to Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Weber, is the removal of errors, the elimination of the irrational—assuming we become conscious of these errors and correct them. Yet even this “formula” for the movement of history must be qualified, since the movement of history is frequently created around the many possibilities of an historical epoch and not solely by a step by step resolution of various problems. (AD 24) History is not driven from behind with a solution already contained within it. Nor can a specific future be logically derived from the past or present. The future, however, as we have just seen, is not completely arbitrary, since certain possibilities cluster around the conditions of
certain epochs. In either case, though, looking backward or forward, Merleau-Ponty finds a view of the rationality of history that agrees with his own general ideas of human rationality: it always “remains to be created.” (AD 22) Merleau-Ponty thus finds much to agree with in Weber’s approach. He reserves his criticism of Weber for the opening pages of the book’s next chapter on Georg Lukacs, to which we should now turn below.

Summarizing Lukacs, Merleau-Ponty continues to stress a non-reductionist, holistic dialectic. “There are subjects, objects, there are men and things, but there is also a third order, that of the relationship between men inscribed in tools or social symbols. These relationships have their development, their advances, and their regressions. Just as in the life of the individual, as in this generalized life there are tentative aims, failure or success, reaction of the result on the aim, repetition or variation, and this is what one calls history.” (AD 38).

This way of looking at history (i.e., as a third order, as human relationships that have become inscribed in things and social symbols through praxis) is in agreement with Merleau-Ponty’s earlier philosophical and political studies and is integrated into his own political dialectical method, into his own way of making sense of society and the movement of history.

For our purposes here this is the most important aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of Lukacs: the discussion of his conception of knowledge, truth, and historical rationality. This discussion makes several points. First of all, Merleau-Ponty approves of Lukacs’ critical claim that Weber did not take relativism far enough. Lukacs fully accepts the idea that knowledge (in this case historical knowledge) is relative, that it does not transcend history, that it is a part of it and is conditioned by it. The historian necessarily views the past from the point of view of the distorting lens of the present. Yet, for Lukacs, this does not bar the historian from the past and from the possibility of securing at least a glimpse of it. Since present societies are influenced by the past, the past is not completely alien or “other” to those of us living in the present. We are part of its unfolding. Since the past lives in us, we can, at least to a degree, live in and understand it. Merleau-Ponty’s characterization of Lukacs’ method here is similar to his characterization of his own. We have already seen Merleau-Ponty say that human beings exist within a temporal present that opens to a past that includes and continues to influence it. This means that human knowledge is relative, that it takes off
from a certain time and place within history, but that it is also open to other times and places, for the
present remains connected to them. Moreover, our intimate involvement in a particular time and place
means that there is no completely objective view of history, for we cannot remove ourselves from
history in order to completely objectify it. What we can do, in an attempt to understand other times
and other places, is attempt to grasp them through our own. When, for example, we are studying
kinship in another culture, statistical, objective data are helpful but not complete. Objective data may
tell us the number of families that count first cousins as immediate family members and those that do
not. Yet these data do not tell us what it is for a family member to experience a first cousin as an
immediate family member. To understand this experience, what the ethnologist must do is first see
the other person’s experience as a variation of his or her own, then see his or her own experience as a
variation of the research subject’s, and finally see both as a variation of possible ways of being
oriented toward the world and toward the world with other human beings. Because we are all
human beings, because we have similar bodies (not identical bodies, for there is no identical essence
in each of us) and similar needs, because we subsequently act in the world and experience it in similar
ways, we are at least partially capable of understanding the experiences lived-through by others. This
remains all the more true of those who live through the same culture and the same history. For their
common means of socially, linguistically, and culturally patterning experience (their praxis in a broad
sense) can bring them closer yet. However, as we observed in Merleau-Ponty’s earlier philosophical
and linguistic studies, since all human beings are similarly embodied, we all possess the means of at
least glimpsing the humanity of others, regardless of cultural differences.

It should also be mentioned here that Merleau-Ponty approves of Lukacs’ refusal to admit that
consciousness is just a result of material, economic conditions. For Lukacs, consciousness is not just a
thing or a passive mirroring of things, a mere epiphenomenon. To speak of false consciousness, says
Merleau-Ponty summarizing Lukacs, “is to say that something within us warns it that it is not all
together correct and invites it to rectify itself.” (AD 42) If we claim all consciousness is false, say, for
example, because of ideological manipulation, then we must turn to a solely objective method to
somehow confirm this claim. But this turn forgets that the supposedly objective scientists are themselves conscious subjects attempting to integrate and understand events. This is indeed what Lukacs is attempting to express when he says consciousness is not just a product of society and history but is required to synthesize and totalize it. Merleau-Ponty explains that for Lukacs:

“There is only one knowledge, which is knowledge of our world in a state of becoming—which embraces knowledge itself. Thus, there is that movement in which knowledge looks back on its origins,...gathers itself together in order to totalize itself, and tends toward consciousness.”  (AD 32)

If consciousness did not see the past, if consciousness did not see the whole and how its parts come together and do not come together, if human beings did not consciously attempt to overcome the disharmonies, there would be no human history. There would be blind repetition and incidental mutations. There can be little doubt, then, that for Lukacs consciousness must play a role in the unfolding of human history and the development of historical rationality. It is a role that Merleau-Ponty is largely in agreement with, thus retaining a role for the subject in the movement of history that some have denied remains in Adventures of the Dialectic. What Adventures of the Dialectic explicitly rejects is that this role must be played by the proletariat in order to bring about a society that is truly just for all.

One last point should be mentioned before leaving Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of Lukacs, for his interpretation of Lukacs leads him to make the following statement about Marx:

“Marx...introduce[s] a new mode of historical existence and of meaning: praxis. Everything that we have mentioned concerning the relationship between subject and object in Marxism was only an approximation of praxis. Class consciousness in the proletariat is not a state of mind, nor knowledge. It is not, however, a theoreticians conception because it is praxis; that is to say, it is less than a subject and more than an object; it is polarized existence, a possibility which appears in the proletariat's situation at the juncture of things and his life.”  (AD 47)

Once again, now expressed in a political treatise, we see that it is the notion of praxis that brings together the subject and object and forms a third region between them, the region of human beings interacting with each other and things, where meanings and social relationships come together and become institutionalized as rational structures. As we will see momentarily, this notion is one of the most important in Merleau-Ponty’s development of his own political dialectical rationality. For now
we should point out that *Adventures of the Dialectic* does not deny, as some have maintained,\(^3\) that history has a *sens* (a meaning *and* direction). We observe here that a certain praxis, a certain means of organizing behavior and interacting with others, can and does polarize human existence. This polarization may well give rise to certain problems, and may even suggest a certain range of solutions and a certain range of open ended possibilities. These solutions and possibilities are not already written in human nature or events, as Modernists (either capitalist or communist) have claimed, but, given human nature (that certain truths/values may be suggested by an experience that is nevertheless made more precise by certain social, cultural, linguistic articulations) and given a specific social situation (capitalism, not feudalism), certain solutions and possibilities may well be *suggested*, may well appear as more probable that others. These solutions and possibilities are not pre-determined, they must still be created, and there is no guarantee that they will work or take hold. Or, if they do work or take hold, there is certainly no guarantee that other problems will not arise. The point here, however, is that history does have a direction. The future is not logically derived from the present, but it may well be suggested by the present, by both the problems and possibilities sketched out there.

In his treatment of V.I. Lenin Merleau-Ponty informs us that in 1924 Lukacs was confronted with the Marxist orthodoxy of Lenin's *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, with its reductionistic materialism and *tabula rasa* empiricism that, apparently, had forgotten everything philosophy had to teach us since Epicurus. (AD 59-60) Departing from a brief criticism of Lenin’s rather simplistic characterization of philosophy in general and of empiricist/materialist philosophy in particular, Merleau-Ponty turns to question why Lukacs, a superb dialectician, would seriously consider a criticism based on such a philosophy. He supplies what he thinks is the answer: what Lukacs comes to accept from the orthodoxy was that his own dialectic “lacked a means of expressing the inertia of the infrastructure, the resistance of economic and even natural conditions, and the swallowing up of personal relationships in things.” (AD 64) Merleau-Ponty goes on to make the following assertion about Lukacs and the “Western Marxism of 1923.” (AD 64)
“In order to understand the logic...of history, its meaning and what, within it, resists meaning, they still had to conceptualize the sphere proper to history, the institution, which develops neither according to causal laws, like a second nature, but always in dependence on its meaning, nor according to eternal ideas, but rather by bringing more or less under its laws events...which are fortuitous [to it] and by letting itself be changed by their suggestions. Torn by all the contingencies, repaired by involuntary actions of men who are caught in it and want to live, the web deserves the name of neither spirit nor matter but, more exactly, that of history. This order of ‘things’ which teaches ‘relationships between persons,’ sensitive to all the heavy conditions which bind it to the order of nature, open to all that personal life can invent, is, in modern language, the sphere of symbolism, and Marx’s thought was to find its outlet here.” (AD 64-65)

In terms of understanding Merleau-Ponty’s own dialectical rationality, this is one of the most crucial and telling statements of Adventures of the Dialectic. Two comments are called for. First, it is clear from the above statement that Merleau-Ponty agrees that Lukacs’ earlier dialectic was too “subjective,” that it did not account for the inertia of history. Yet, he of course refused to accept the orthodoxy’s appeal to material conditions alone as the explanation of the movement of history.

Instead, Merleau-Ponty focuses on what we have seen him refer to as “institution,” as the place where history unfolds, and finds a precedent for it in the young Marx. To use the language already introduced above, history must be understood as the relationship between people mediated by things, as relationships that have become impressed in things and habitualized in social institutions, including the institution of language. Human beings are born into this stable social/historical milieu, which is neither thing nor consciousness but a mixture of both, and they are able to take it up, without grasping the whole, in order to change it and gain greater recognition within it. This, in fact, is how we should account for history. Its inertia (or its continued movement in a particular direction) is accounted for by the stability of various social, political, and economic institutions, and its progressive movement (or its increased democratization) is grasped by recognizing that the human beings who must live in institutions that are not always satisfactory assimilate them but also attempt to change them.

Secondly, the sphere of symbolism that Merleau-Ponty speaks of here is one that takes up life as it is lived and acted, as we have also seen above in his linguistic studies. Language is a prolongation and articulation of this life. It is not cut off from incarnate conscious life but is an expression of it and, as well, a means to help its expression. Merleau-Ponty is fully aware that Lenin’s Marxist
orthodoxy of the 1920's would have nothing to do with this new kind of dialectical rationality as it was beginning to take shape in Lukacs’ thought. “Marxist orthodoxy,” he says, “is satisfied with placing things and the relationship between persons side by side...” “This means replacing history as a relationship between persons embodied in ‘things’ by a ‘second nature’ which is opaque and determined like the first.” (AD 65) As was mentioned above, Lukacs accepts the orthodoxy’s criticism of his dialectic, yet in his theory of literature Merleau-Ponty claims that “...he maintains...the possibility of reflection, the life of subjectivity in the order of culture...” (AD 67) Merleau-Ponty continues:

“...when [Lukacs] writes that realism is not simple notation or observation, that it demands narration and transposition, this implies that the work of art is not a simple reflection of history and society. It expresses them not punctually but by its organic unity and its internal law. It is a microcosm, and there is a value of expression which is not a simple function of economic and social progress; there is a history of culture which is not always parallel to political history; and there is a Marxism which appreciates literary works according to intrinsic criteria and not according to the author’s political conformity.” (AD 68-69)

Merleau-Ponty agrees with Lukacs’ claim that literature does not exactly parallel the economic or the political, that it has its own criteria of internal development, and that there must be a conscious awareness to sustain these criteria. Merleau-Ponty continues his favorable comments on Lukacs.

“This claim of a relative autonomy for art is one of the consequences of the famous law of unequal development, which holds that the different orders of phenomena existing at the same time—as elsewhere political and social facts which appear in different sequences—do not develop according to a uniform plan. This law in turn supposes a dialectical conception of the unity of history, that is to say, a unity rich in final convergence and not a unity by reduction to a single order of reality or a single genetic schema. The dialectical conception in the end supposes a logic of history based on the immanent development of each order of facts, of each historical sequence, and on the self-suppression of the false, and not on a positive principle which would govern things from outside.” (AD 69).

For both Merleau-Ponty and Lukacs, then, the dialectic is not reductionist. It must take all aspects of human life into account, must recognize their relative autonomy, and finally must try to understand how they all converge to create human meaning and human history. It is this total convergence and its movement that is the logic or rationality of history. Moreover, this understanding of the total convergence of all aspects of human life clearly has its origins in Merleau-Ponty’s preceding philosophical and linguistic studies. It clearly resonates with his earlier expression of rationality as an
agreement of perceptual profiles, as an existential blending of perspectives or experiences, and it clearly resonates with the Fundierung relationship as a crisscrossing of aspects of experience into one another.

In his treatment of Trotsky, the book’s most explicitly political analysis, Merleau-Ponty finds much to agree with in Trotsky’s dialectical thesis. It is with Trotsky's actual practice, and the hidden thesis that this practice reveals, that Merleau-Ponty will take exception. Summarizing Trotsky’s dialectic Merleau-Ponty reveals a position very close to the one he has been synthesizing and constructing to this point. He begins with a favorable discussion of Trotsky’s treatment of the internal connection between means and ends. For Trotsky, according to Merleau-Ponty, our means should announce our ends. If they do not, we unwittingly change our ends, for our means are the way to achieve them. (AD 76). One of the ends of political action for both Trotsky and Merleau-Ponty is the education of the proletariat, the proletariat’s increased awareness of social/political conditions, and the proletariat’s increased participation in the political process. If our actions do not lead to this end, then, according to this end, our actions are not justifiable.

While Merleau-Ponty abandons this idea of the fulfillment of history in one class, he does proceed to express his agreement with Trotsky’s idea of the historical unfolding of rationality. It is a view of rationality that is consonant with the rationality that is developed in Merleau-Ponty’s earlier philosophical and linguistic studies.

“[For Trotsky there is]...no guarantee against non-sense than this step-by-step confirmation of the present by that which succeeds it, this snowballing accumulation of history that ever more forcefully indicates its sense.” “It is a fact that there are convergences, phenomena which support and confirm one another because they obey the same law of structure, and this is the case of all those phenomena that can be grouped under the notion of capitalism. The internal contradictions which dissociate, the affinity, which on the contrary, brings together and confirms the one by the other, the advances of the proletariat, such are the data of spontaneous history. It falls to man’s consciousness to achieve this outline, to coordinate the scattered forces, to find for them the point of application where they will have maximum efficiency...Thus there is a logic in things which eliminates false solutions; there are men who invent and try the true solutions, but nowhere is there an already written future.” (AD 77)

For neither Merleau-Ponty nor Trotsky is there a rationality outside of history that guides or drives it. Historical rationality is the movement of history itself (just as perceptual rationality is the movement
of our perception). Rationality is the successive confirmation of social/political solutions by those that succeed them—especially if these solutions include greater awareness and participation (just as perceptual rationality is an agreement of successive perspectives, especially if this rationality is open to all perspectives). Furthermore, history is not so much the sketching of the rational as the elimination of the irrational, the elimination of conflict and solutions that did not work, and the move toward greater participation and harmony. Yet, for both Merleau-Ponty and Trotsky history still has a sens, a meaning and a direction, even though this direction is far less certain. As we have already witnessed The Prose of the World above, this direction or future is certainly not logically derived from present conditions; it must be constructed. Yet present conditions do outline a certain range of possibilities, possibilities that must be recognized and processed by aware subjects in order to be actualized but that are rooted or suggested in the present conditions nonetheless, as we witness in Merleau-Ponty’s comment on Trotsky in Adventures of the Dialectic below.

“The party is not admitted to the supposed verdicts of historical reason: there is no ready-made historical reason; there is a meaning of history sketched in the convulsions of the spontaneous history and a voluntary and methodological recovery of history which reflects this meaning back into history.” “History will become manifest on the condition that all that is lived by workers is clarified by the politics which is proposed to them by the party and which they adopt as their own. In the absence of any metaphysics of history, the dialectic of the proletariat and the party gathers together all others and bears them within itself.” (AD 78)

History still has a sens, a meaning and a future direction; true, it must be sensed, and stated, by the politician, the statesman, or perhaps even by the philosopher; it must be confirmed by those living through it; and it must still be accomplished to be actualized. Yet, this sens is still suggested by present conditions (capitalism, for example, not feudalism) that outline a certain range of possible and even probable future events.

Moreover, since history is not ready-made, we must abandon the mature Marx and return to a dialectic that is more in line with the young Marx's thought. Merleau-Ponty attempts to do so in the following statement:

“In principle a revolutionary society would be one which was born, not of a seed long since deposited in the previous society, ripened and ‘hatched,’ as Marx said, in its objective functioning, but, on the
contrary, through ‘crossgrowth’, through the ‘internal mechanism’ of a conflict which has grown by itself to the point of destroying the social structures in which it had appeared.” (AD 92)

Revolution occurs not just as the result of the movement of things or economic conditions alone but as a “crossgrowth” of all the elements of society. As the economic, political, religious, legal and cultural regions of society come together, conflicts and harmonies arise. As individuals assimilate the institutions of all these regions in order to operate and gain recognition within them, conflicts and harmonies arise, and it is out of these conflicts and harmonies that history is formed. It is the resolution of these conflicts that Merleau-Ponty refers to as the rationality of history. By articulating his understanding of the movement of history as he does here, Merleau-Ponty is emphasizing the same holistic dialectical rationality that we first saw appear in his earlier philosophical and linguistic studies, that we saw refined in his studies of Weber, Lukacs, and Trotsky, and that is now restated and refined in opposition to the materialist dialectic found in the mature Marx, in Lenin, and subsequently in Soviet politics.

Furthermore, even though Merleau-Ponty finds much to agree with in Trotsky’s thought, since Trotsky’s historical rationality is consonant with and even confirms much of Merleau-Ponty’s earlier discussion of phenomenological rationality, he remains critical of Trotsky’s practice. Trotsky remained committed to the idea that the party’s interests could not be different from the interests of the proletariat. Merleau-Ponty surmises that Trotsky does so because he remained committed to Marx’s materialist conception of history, to the idea that as soon as private property was overcome that a classless society without conflict would take its place. This did not occur in the Soviet Union, and surely for many reasons: the communist party had become entrenched because of the counter revolutionary forces inside and outside its boarders, the revolution had occurred in an undeveloped country and therefore lacked an educated proletariat, the necessities involved in the attempt to transform an agricultural economy to an industrial one, etc. Yet, for Merleau-Ponty, an additional and decisive reason must be named: the materialist dialectic, the dialectic with its automatic unfolding of a history that is perfectly grasped by the party, that reduces all conflict to conflict with the
bourgeoisie, and that effectively eliminates conflict within the party. For Merleau-Ponty, the dialectic must center not on material/economic conditions alone but must look at the social whole, at the “crossgrowth” of all of society’s elements. Within this conception of the dialectic, society must be understood as a gestalt whole, a whole within which regions interact yet maintain a relative autonomy, a whole within which aware individuals interact seeking recognition and an agreement of perspectives.

To express the dialectic in the language of the philosophy of history, and to summarize the discussion of the dialectic as it is expressed in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, we can say, first of all, that Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea that history can be understood as the immanent movement of things or ideas, rejects the idea that the dialectical movement of history occurs either in material conditions or ideas alone. We can see, to the contrary, that he embraces the more holistic dialectic put forth by Weber, Lukacs, and Trotsky, which reflect his own more philosophical studies. This dialectic insists on looking at the interaction of all of the elements and all the regions of society. They must be seen as coming together and forming a gestalt whole, where each element influences and is influenced by all the others. The movement of history must therefore be understood as a crossgrowth of all the regions of human experience and human society. Society, then, must be understood as a mixed milieu, as an intersubjective phenomenon where the lives of individuals come together and come together with things. We have seen that Merleau-Ponty accepts the young Marx’s notion of praxis, where conscious individuals impress human meanings onto the natural world by means of individual and collective labor. When human beings subsequently act into the natural and social world, including its symbolic and linguistic dimensions, we necessarily find ourselves surrounded by already established human meanings. The natural world already contains visible human forms, and the social/linguistic world is replete with already established meanings, with institutionalized ways of acting and interacting, and thus replete with inertia. The incarnate subject consciously opens to a natural and social world that already includes the subject and others, that already includes established meanings, institutionalized means of expression, and habitualized forms of human relationships. Each individual must
consciously take up these institutions, yet often without conceiving the whole, in order to express him or herself and to gain recognition within them. It is this interaction that drives the movement of history. History, in fact, occurs as the relationship between persons mediated by the inertia of things, of economic conditions, and of social institutions, including language.

The second aspect of the dialectic developed by Weber, Lukacs and Trotsky that Merleau-Ponty affirms is the dialectical development of rationality in general and historical rationality in particular. Rationality in general is no longer treated as pre-established, either in the realm of ideas or in nature in-itself. Rather, rationality remains to be established. Rationality, at least at first, is the contingent agreement of embodied perspectives, of mine and of mine with those of others, as we act into the world together. Moreover, as an example of rationality in general, historical rationality displays similar characteristics. There is to be no pre-established historical rationality, for historical rationality is itself a retrospective agreement of perspectives, of the present culture’s perspective with those of its past. The rationality of history, then, is the confirmation of past moments by those that succeed it. At each moment of history, a society is composed of various institutions that regulate the interactions of its citizens with each other and with nature. If these institutions are successful, if they manage this regulation with little tension, these institutions will in all likelihood be confirmed by succeeding generations. However, if they produce tension, if they do not allow for successful adaptation to nature, or if they regulate human interactions in a way that is regarded as unjust by their participants, then conflict will emerge and in all likelihood remain until the tension is reduced, until new institutions and regulations are formed. Historical rationality, then, is the society’s resolution of its problems and its confirmation of its relative successes.

This notion of historical rationality and rationality in general significantly challenges the West’s traditional adherence to rational principles that are pre-established and eternal. The challenge to the West’s hegemony and its exclusive claim to rationality has been steadily and rightfully gaining ground. In fact, it must be recognized that the adventures of the dialectic undertaken by Merleau-Ponty and the political left make a significant contribution to the atmosphere in which a more
pluralistic, multicultural approach to rationality has taken shape. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty manages to make this contribution in a way that does not completely abandon Western rationality but broadens and contextualizes it. This new contingent rationality, as we have seen in the studies of language above, has its basis in the lived body’s perceptual openness unto one sole world and in the fact that human beings have similar bodies that open upon this world in similar ways. It is in this way that he manages to ground an open and tentative rationality. And it is in this way that Merleau-Ponty manages to avoid the traditional adherence to a pre-established and necessary rationality, while at the same time avoiding the currently popular postmodernist position—that maintains that rationality is merely an agreement among interlocutors.

If we observe Merleau-Ponty’s claim late in Adventures of the Dialectic, that the dialectic “is incomplete as long as it does not pass into other perspectives and into the perspectives of others,” we once again observe a reference to the multicultural approach that Merleau-Ponty expresses so clearly at the end of Humanism and Terror. Both Humanism and Terror and Adventures of the Dialectic claim that rationality is an agreement of perspectives. Both texts have argued against a pre-established rationality, Humanism and Terror against the already established rationality of Kantian liberal democracies, and Adventures of the Dialectic against the already established rationality that authoritarian communism found in history. Yet, here in the closing chapters of Adventures of the Dialectic, Merleau-Ponty again echoes the thesis of his earlier political work.

“Nothing is more foreign to [the dialectic properly conceived] than the Kantian conception of an ideality of the world which is the same in everyone, just as the number two or the triangle is the same in every mind, outside of meetings or exchanges: the natural and human world is unique, not because it is parallely constituted in everyone or because the “I think” is indiscernible in myself and in the other, but because our difference opens onto that world, because we are imitatible and participateable through each other in this relationship with it.” (AD 204)

For Merleau-Ponty, there is no pre-established rationality. Rationality always remains to be accomplished. Yet it is not impossible to establish, for similarly embodied human beings open to one world in similar ways. Yet out of this one world, human beings differentiate, individuate and separate themselves from each other. Merleau-Ponty manages, then, to avoid the troublesome absoluteness of
the Modernist position, for he rejects a pre-established and necessary rationality, yet he also avoids
the problematic relativism and skepticism of many Postmodern philosophies, for he grounds
linguistic agreement in similar bodies opening upon one sole world in similar ways. This agreement,
however, always remains tentative and incomplete, since nature, life, and society continue to change
and unfold, and since human beings are different as well as similar. Truth and rationality, for
Merleau-Ponty, are formed at the intersection of aware, embodied individuals with each other and
with nature. Rationality is nothing other than this provisional dialectical intersection and exchange.

Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the problems of the materialist dialectic—history as the immanent
movement of things, the Party’s privileged awareness of this truth of things, and finally and more
specifically, the Soviet Union’s Korean War policy—leads him to the following political
pronouncement:

“This situation can end only with the birth of a noncommunist left.” “[A noncommunist left] is a
necessary condition for knowledge of the U.S.S.R. because it confronts what we know of communist
reality with communist ideology; and it is, at the same time and without paradox, the condition of a
modern critique of capitalism because it alone poses Marx’s problems again in modern terms. It
alone is capable of a perpetual confrontation and comparison of the two systems.” (AD 225)

It is clear here that Merleau-Ponty does not abandon the political left, for he wishes to continue to
criticize capitalism from the point of view of an up-dated Marxism, a revised Marxism that he himself
has tried to contribute to by abandoning an authoritarian communism based on the supposed
necessities of the materialist dialectic.

In an attempt to discover the truth of the two dominant political systems in the 20th century,
Soviet communism and Western liberal democracies, rather than simply repeat their respective
ideologies, Merleau-Ponty remains critical of both while borrowing from each. In true dialectical
fashion, he integrates a noncommunist left with what he calls a new liberalism. This new liberalism
does not rely upon a pre-given rationality or truth, but rests upon a rationality that remains to be
established by human beings that open to the world in a similar ways. This new liberalism listens to
all voices, and tries to take them all into account, refuting them only by pointing out their own
inconsistencies. No position is outlawed, and the truth of any position is not complete until it takes
into account the insights of its opposition. Merleau-Ponty expresses it this way:

“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 a society to speculative conflicts of opinion, political struggle to exchanges of views on clearly posed problems, and the coexistence of men to relationships of fellow citizens in the political empyrean. This kind of liberalism is no longer practiced anywhere.” (AD 225)

“If we speak of liberalism, it is in the sense that...we expect progress only from a conscious action which will confront itself with the judgment of an opposition. Like Weber’s heroic liberalism, it lets even what contests it enter its universe, and it is justified in its own eyes only when it understands the opposition.” (AD 226)

This last statement is strikingly similar to what is now called multiculturalism, and it is a statement of multiculturalism that is based on the human body’s openness upon the world. It is a view that we have seen developed in Adventures of the Dialectic as a dialectical philosophy, and it is a view, as we have already seen above, that Merleau-Ponty expressed at the end of Humanism and Terror.

Moreover, the Merleau-Ponty of Adventures of the Dialectic quite positively believes that the parliamentary democracies of the West provide at least a minimum of access to open discussion and debate—positive, because they do provide at least a minimum of access, and have the best attempt yet to do so, but also negative, because this access is only minimal. Furthermore, because classes still exist, because representatives of the wealthy can more freely manipulate information, ideology and the political process itself, obfuscation, mystification, and unjust control endure, and it is these practices that the political left should be sensitive to, point out, and criticize. Criticism from the point of view of the political left thus remains important, for classes still exist, for the capitalist system continues to exploit a significant portion of the population—some more than others—while disproportionally rewarding a few, with both wealth and power. In fact, as we have already seen, in his Signs Introduction, Merleau-Ponty will say five years after the publication of Adventures of the Dialectic that Marx’s ideas should continue to be used as a heuristic device, while, at the same time, the details of Marx’s theories should be reevaluated, reworked, and up-dated to account for changing circumstances and the advances of human knowledge. This is certainly sound advice, for many of Marx’s ideas remain insightful—for example, and speaking in general terms, Marx’s analysis of
class, with its reports of the inequality of wealth and power, his theory of alienation, his theory of exploitation, etc.—yet we must never take these ideas for granted and must always rethink them according to our own times and circumstances.

Returning now to the *Sign* Introduction with which we began, we see that its author claims that it is extremely difficult to develop a meaningful philosophy of political change and guidance, since no one seems to listen to philosophy, and politics always veers off in its own direction. (*Signs* 3) He proceeds to report that Marxist philosophers of the mid 20th Century seem to accept these claims and, thus, the inevitable separation of philosophy and politics. Marxism has been deeply concerned with the metaphysical relations between mind and matter and finds this relationship in the practical, intentional transformation of nature for the fulfillment of the full range of human needs. This historical transformation, it was believed, will eventually lead to the end of history and the realization of philosophy. Philosophy, the projection of an ideal state into the future, will bring about its own destruction by its fulfillment, by the proletarian establishment of a classless society with freedom and equality for all. (*Signs* 5-6) Yet, Merleau-Ponty claims, this philosophical/metaphysical vision of a fulfilled future, by the middle of the 20th Century, had been replaced by or reduced to efforts to achieve immediate technical results. With one extreme replaced by another, “practice [now] became tricky” in the sense that it was not guided by thoughtful future goals, and “thought became superstitious” in the sense that it did not meaningfully abstract from immediate practical outcomes. (*Signs* 6)

Many Marxist philosophers, Merleau-Ponty reports, broke with this to reconsider their role. They maintained, on the one hand, that they wanted to retain what was essential about Marxism, yet did not state what this was, and, on the other hand, that a new philosophy was required, yet neglected to state or develop this as well. (*Signs* 6-7) To find what was essential in Marxism, they would have to consider the relationship of Marx, both young and mature, to Hegel, and the development of this tradition by the Soviet Union, including by Lenin, Stalin, and the party leaders that followed them. Marxist philosophers have not done this, at least not at the time Merleau-Ponty was writing in 1960.
They, instead, blamed orthodox Marxism for its dogmatism, i.e., its *philosophy*, and subsequently turned to the *sciences*—studies that were independent of the party politics. (*Signs* 7-8) Yet, they still conjectured, maybe in practice the proletariat will someday appear to establish the role Marx claimed. But, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to maintain, this very “appeal to an indefinite future preserves the doctrine as a way of thinking,” and this is precisely what Marx labeled as the misuse of philosophy. Philosophy was to be destroyed by the movement of history but only by its fulfillment or its complete realization. Philosophy is a hoped for realization of a fulfilled life that is realized by the future negation of the unjust present. (*Signs* 8) This metaphysical realization, this metaphysical realization of the subject in nature, this metaphysical relationship between the subject and nature, Merleau-Ponty reports, clearly has not taken place. Philosophy has not been destroyed, for this destruction is granted only by its realization in history, when the projected state of fulfillment, equality and freedom for all, is obtained, and this certainly has not yet taken place.

Events, then, have led to the need for a reformed Marxism, since Marxism can certainly no longer be regarded as true in the way that it was originally conceived to be, as the destruction of philosophy by the proletarian fulfillment of it. However, Merleau-Ponty insists, Marxism can still “inspire and orient analysis,” can still, as we have seen, act a heuristic device. (*Signs* 9) Marx’s philosophy remains a classic, he says, and because it does so, all philosophers since have had to take it into account. New positions are and should be formed with respect to it, even when they disagree with it. (*Signs* 11) Marx’s philosophy thus can be used meaningfully as general guide, as a general orientation, but not literally. We may, for example, still argue that classes and class exploitation still exists, and this may well guide, in some general way, a political policy, yet there is little additional evidence that history will *inevitably* move toward the universal liberation of a classless society. Merleau-Ponty reports favorably that many Marxist philosophers of the mid 20th Century understood this and rightfully rejected the party’s mechanical reductions and rightfully grasped that “history is made by different means and with a different rhythm on different levels,…that history has more than one focus, or more than one dimension, frame of reference, or source of meaning.” They adopted “the
idea of a coherent being of many foci or dimensions.” (Signs 12) “But,” he proceeds to ask, “is this kind of Marxism even the outline of a policy? Is the theoretical grasp of history it provides a practical one as well?” (Signs 12-13) Merleau-Ponty admits that we still do not fully understand this relationship, that “the relationship between philosophy and history is less simple than was believed.” History is not philosophy realized, and we must now seek to understand the relationship more accurately. Our times thus call for a new effort, for a new understanding of philosophy, for a new understanding of rationality and its relationship to history and politics. As we have witnessed above, it is Merleau-Ponty’s life-long work, dealing with philosophy, art, language, history and politics, that has already begun to sketch out this new understanding.

Concluding Remarks

I conclude with a brief enumeration of what makes Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and politics relevant today.

1.) He has developed a viable multicultural rationality that is “grounded” in the body’s perceptual openness upon a public world, a rationality that accounts for the relationship between perception and language, rather than leaving perception behind. This rationality is neither absolute nor arbitrary.

2.) Given this view of rationality, he was able to articulate an “identity” politics that accounts for how group members, who share a common way of being-in-the-world, may act for their common interests, but in a way that does not end with a relativism of groups. Granted, no two groups (or even individuals) are the exactly same, yet, since human beings have similar bodies, and similar embodied ways of being-in-the-world, we should be able to at least capture a glimpse of each other’s general orientation toward the world. We should therefore be able to move, through open and inclusive dialog, toward a set of general rights (such as, for example, freedom from unprovoked attack, freedom of speech, of religion, of political participation, of education, for dignified work, etc.), but then we must recognize and respect differences (women, for example, should be granted pregnancy leave because of their unique biological child bearing role). Certain unique rights for certain groups,
then, may well be acceptable, as long as they do not violate the more general or universal rights just stated above.\textsuperscript{40}

3.) He has sketched an alternative to both Modernism’s natural law ethics, with its ethical values already determined by nature or Divine reason, and Postmodernism’s conventionalist ethics, with its ethical values freely determined by, seemingly, arbitrary choice. Applying the \textit{Fundierung} relationship to ethics, we can see that ethical values are not strictly determined by our natural tendencies, but that these tendencies may well suggest or motivate a certain range of ethical values. Yet just as language is needed to fold back upon the perception that motivates it, in order to articulate it more fully and precisely, so also the language of ethical choice is needed to fold back upon these tendencies, on order to articulate and define them. Ethical values are formed by the coming together of embodied human tendencies with the choices and institutions of a specific community.

4.) He has sketched an alternative to both an ethics grounded in care and an ethics grounded in reason, since his works suggest an ethics grounded in their integration. We have seen that that his rationality is grounded in the body’s lived-through perceptual openness upon a public world. We cannot literally think another person’s thoughts, but that we can, at least partially or laterally, perceive what another person perceives. Through the phenomenon of postural coupling, i.e., by means of the human ability to perceive and then empathize with another’s gestures, we are able to feel and recognize the humanity of others. (PrP 145-146 \textsuperscript{41}) Beginning with this recognition of the other, and with other perceivers who recognize and judge us, we can begin to move, through rational dialog (in Merleau-Ponty’s sense, not Kant’s), toward at least a minimalist system of values that is acceptable to all.

5.) He has developed a non-reductionist view of history and politics. The economy, as important as it is, is not the only driving engine of history. Citizens frequently act (or vote) for many reasons other than economic reasons. These reasons must thus be addressed, and they must be addressed on their own terms. Economic and class issues are still vitally important, and they should be addressed,
yet they are not the only issues to be addressed, and they are not always the most significant in a particular election or at a particular time in history.

6.) He has helped explain the inertia of history. Since social institutions routine-ize and habitual-ize human behavior, and since they frequently do so for the benefit of those in power, social/political change is often difficult and cumbersome.

7.) And finally, he reminds us that we must continually seek and express the truth, deflate the myths, correct the “spin,” and in general expose the deceptions of power. This is what he attempts to do throughout his professional life and certainly what he attempts to do in his two political treatises. We would do well to follow his lead.

Chronology of significant Merleau-Ponty texts.


4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, sixth printing, trans. Colin Smith with corrections by Forrest Williams (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962). Referred to in the text as PhP. See p. 394, where the author states the following: “The relation…of thought to language or of thought to perception is a two-way relationship that phenomenology has called Fundierung: the founding term, or originator—….the unreflective, the fact, language, perception—is primary in the sense that the originated is presented as a determinate or explicit form of the originator, which prevents the latter from absorbing the former, and yet the originator is not primary in the empiricist sense and the originated is not simply derived from it, since it is through the originated that the originator is made manifest.”


It has been argued that Merleau-Ponty’s early works focus on perception. The reference here is usually to *The Structure of Behavior, Phenomenology of Perception*, “Cezanne’s Doubt,” and *Humanism and Terror*. His later studies, it is claimed, shift to a focus on language and eventually to ontology, with the belief (implicate or explicate) that perception and phenomenology are left behind. The reference here is to Merleau-Ponty’s linguistic studies that appeared in the late 1940s and the early 1950s, to *Adventures of the Dialectic*, published in 1955, and to the 1961 posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*. This shift or inconsistency gives rise to another inconsistency in the body of Merleau-Ponty’s work: to two incongruent views of history/politics, one appearing in 1947 (*Humanism and Terror*) and the other in 1955 (*Adventures of the Dialectic*). These claims have been put forth by James Schmidt, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985), pp., 149, 163, and more or less followed by Kerry Whiteside, *Merleau-Ponty and the Foundation of an Existential Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 264, 275.

Even though both of these books represent first-rate studies of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of history and politics, I believe they are wrong about the so-called break in the body of Merleau-Ponty’s work. I will thus attempt to make the case that there is no such break, and, since I have dealt with this issue more philosophically elsewhere (see note 3 above), I will here focus on Merleau-Ponty political writings—within which Merleau-Ponty expresses his philosophy of history. Schmidt’s book will be referred in the text as JS. Whiteside’s book will be referred to as KW. The Merleau-Ponty texts mentioned in this note will be cited below, if they have not already been cited above.


“Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” in *Signs*, op. cit. Referred to in the text as ILVS.

Whiteside, in an essay written after the appearance of his above cited book, correctly mentions the importance of Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of language in his essay “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” for the political analysis that appears in *Adventures of the Dialectic*. This we must agree with. What he does not deal with is the connection of “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” to *The Prose of the World* and the connection of the latter to Merleau-Ponty’s earlier studies of perception and perceptual rationality. Rather, he claims that Merleau-Ponty develops a new form of *universal* in the linguistic studies and that this is what guides his analysis in *Adventures of the Dialectic*. I will argue that Merleau-Ponty does not introduce a new form of linguistic universality but develops his earlier perceptual *logos* by integrating it with language. Kerry Whiteside, “Universality and Violence, Merleau-Ponty, Malraux and the Moral Logic of Liberalism,” in *Philosophy Today*, Winter, 1991, pp. 372-388. See especially pp. 372-380.


16 Notice that Merleau-Ponty does not here, in a text written in 1960, approximately a year before his death, abandon lived through perception as the pre-reflective source of meaning, as some have maintained. This has been discussed at length in Douglas Low, “Merleau-Ponty’s Criticism of Phenomenology of Perception,” op. cit.


18 This point is present in Phenomenology of Perception, op. cit., but not fully developed, see PhP 403, 179.

19 Thus we must disagree with Claude Lefort’s claim that it is in The Prose of the World, op. cit., that we see “the first signs of an ‘indirect ontology.’” See the editor’s preface of PW, xix-xx.

20 See note 11 above.

21 “[Cezanne] wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization. He makes a basic distinction not between the ‘senses’ and the ‘understanding’ but rather between the spontaneous organization of things we perceive and the human organization of ideas and sciences. We see things; we agree about them; we are anchored in them; and it is with ‘nature’ as our base that we construct our sciences.” (SNS 13)

22 See Phenomenology of Perception, op. cit., p. xv, reference to the fisherman’s net, and see also Themes from the Lectures at the College de France (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970, p. 26, reference to the diver sounding). Referred to as TFL in the text.

23 I will here present the two texts together, since the published “Indirect Language and The Voices of Silence,” originally published in 1952, is basically a condensed essay length version of the posthumously published book length manuscript, written in 1951, that comes to be entitled The Prose of the World. The passages that will be cited in most cases appear in both texts, frequently with no changes at all, sometimes with only minor changes. Overall, the two texts make the same point: that the logos or structure of perception gives rise to and is sublimated in the logos of language. For Claude Lefort’s statement regarding the probable date of the writing of The Prose of the World see PW, xiv ff. Both texts are been cited above.

24 Both texts express this as a rhetorical question.


26 Merleau-Ponty, Themes from the Lectures, op. cit., p. 4.


28 Also stated in the 1952 Prospectus, ibid., as we have already witnessed, is the claim that abstract thought and language sublimate our perceptual incarnation, express it at a more integrated and abstract level, yet without completely leaving it behind. Here is the passage, cited partially above, now cited more completely: “knowledge and the communication with others that
it presupposes not only are original formulations with respect to the perceptual life but also they
preserve and continue our perceptual life even while transforming it. Knowledge and
communication sublimate rather than suppress our incarnation.” PrP, p. 6.

29 The Prose of the World, Schmidt says in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, op. cit., was supposed to
provide “a new understanding of Marx’s attempt to place meaning in history” but offers only an
analysis of language and expression. It “never explicitly comes to grips with the problem of
history. Adventures of the Dialectic does—but the relevance of Saussure’s work for its discussion
of Weber, Lukacs, Trotsky, and Sartre remains obscure.” (JS 129) We have seen in this section
that The Prose of the World does address historical meaning: that it is made possible by his theory
of body. And while Schmidt is correct that Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly mention Saussure in
Adventures of the Dialectic, it is clear that many of the insights that he gains by reading Saussure
are used in his development of a philosophy of history. a.) The Saussurean insight that words form
a system and that a word’s meaning is, in part, dependent on its place within the system is used by
Merleau-Ponty to develop a non-reductive view of history. As we will see, the different aspects of
society, its economy, religion, culture, language, etc., form a system and are what they are, at least
in part, because of their place with this whole. b.) The Saussurean insight that language is an open
system, that it is a system in the making, is used by Merleau-Ponty to understand history as an
open system, as a system in the making. c.) The Saussurean insight that thought is dependent on
language not only for its expression but for its very formation is used by Merleau-Ponty to
understand that there is no pre-existent historical rationality.

30 Kerry Whiteside, “Universality and Violence, Merleau-Ponty, Malraux and the Moral Logic
of Liberalism,” op. cit. See note 11 above.

31 See Kerry Whiteside, ibid, p. 372, where he states the following with respect to his essay “The
first section of this essay [pp. 372-376] examines the allege connection between violence and
university in liberal thought, while section two [pp. 376-380] demonstrates that what drove
Merleau-Ponty to criticize Marxism was the discovery that a similar connection existed in
revolutionary theory.” My bracket additions.

32 Kerry Whiteside, ibid, see p. 372, section four pp. 380-383, and especially p. 383.

33 Even though Plato’s works were not explicitly addressed above, we have seen that Merleau-Ponty
explicitly denies the separation of facts and essences. He therefore would not, and does not, accept
a theory of independently existing ideal forms.

34 Merleau-Ponty is of course referring to the U.S.S.R. that is established in 1917 and that
continued to exist well beyond his death in 1961. The eventual breakup of the authoritarian
“brand” of communism in the Soviet Union in 1991 vindicates, at least to some degree, Merleau-
Ponty’s analysis.

35 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, In Praise of Philosophy, trans. by John Wild and James Edie, (Evanston:
Northwestern University Press, 1963). Referred to in the text as IPP.

36 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosopher and Sociology” in Signs, op. cit., pp. 98-113,
especially pp.100 ff.

37 Schmidt, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, op. cit., points out that Phenomenology of Perception makes
the claim that “if we consider what a word expresses emotionally, we can no longer consider the
word as completely arbitrary, for its form appears to be internally connected to the meaning that it
expresses.” (The sentence is Schmidt’s, JS 115, and references PhP 187.) Schmidt proceeds to draw the following conclusion. “The Phenomenology of Perception thus contained an account of expression which differs markedly from Saussure’s understanding of the [arbitrary] nature of the linguistic sign,” which Merleau-Ponty embraces in his later studies. (JS 116) It is his differing views of language, Schmidt argues, that contribute to the problems Merleau-Ponty faces in his later philosophy of history, including the arbitrary nature of history, i.e., that it has no future direction. In the earlier works, then, the word’s meaning seems rooted in the subject’s individual experience, while in the later works words appear to gather their sense from their linguistic/social context, supposedly determined by convention. James Schmidt claims that Merleau-Ponty later works abandon phenomenology and the phenomenological subject, though not agency. See DS 149, 163. Although, we should point out here, it is difficult to see how the appeal to an agent helps understand social movement if this agent is not an aware subject.

38 Schmidt, ibid., maintains that Merleau-Ponty’s use of Saussure to interpret Weber in the later Adventures of the Dialectic is not consistent with what was stated in the earlier Humanism and Terror, particularly with its claim that history has a singular meaning and direction. See JS 140.

39 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Signs, op. cit., p. 9. See also the brief exposition of the Signs Introduction above.


41 The page reference is here to Merleau-Ponty’s “The Child’s Relations with Others” in The Primacy of Perception, op. cit.