In order to form a complete picture of Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Sartre’s philosophy we should consider three of Merleau-Ponty’s primary texts, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Part Three, Chapter 3, “Freedom,” *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Chapter 5, “Sartre and Ultrabolshevism,” and *The Invisible and the Invisible*, Chapter 2, “Interrogation and Dialectic.” Throughout these texts, Merleau-Ponty rather consistently criticizes Sartre’s dualistic ontology of the for-itself and the in-itself, his dualism of for-oneself and for-another, and his stress on the radical freedom of the subject. Merleau-Ponty was not critical of Sartre’s later attempt to speak of the meeting of the subject and the world (through labor), of his attempt to speak of intersubjectively established goals, or of his attempt to speak of the limits to human freedom imposed by external situations. Rather, Merleau-Ponty’s criticism is that given Sartre’s ontological dualism, and his view of the radical freedom of the subject, that it is difficult or even impossible to speak of the coming together of the subject and the world, of the subject with others, and of (undeniable) limits to the subject’s freedom. Let us now turn to the details of Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Sartre in the three texts just mentioned above.

The final chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, entitled “Freedom,” opens with a lengthy description Jean-Paul Sartre’s view of total freedom, a view that claims that the individual creates and chooses all meaning. Nothing *outside* of me can determine who I am, for I am always free to interpret the world in any way that I wish. Moreover, within the context of a philosophy of total freedom, it is impossible for the external world, with its complete determinism, to interact with the freedom of the subject, which is total. Even *internal* motives, Sartre claims, cannot influence my freedom, for if they did I would not be totally free. The typical discussion of motives is thus misleading, for we often imagine ourselves considering the range of motives and choosing according to the motive that appears most appropriate to us. Yet for Sartre it is not the motive that leads to the choice, but the choice that confers value on the motive. Nothing can limit the individual’s freedom.

The alternatives, then, in Sartre’s philosophy, seems to be total freedom or total determinism, total freedom or none at all. This view of freedom, however, is incomprehensible, since it is not associated with human action, but really exists prior to it. “By defining ourselves as a universal power of *Sinn-Gebung*, we have reverted to the method of the ‘thing without which’ and to the analytical reflection of the traditional type . . .” (PhP 239). Yet we are confronted with the conditions of reality, and thus human freedom/meaning is not just centrifugal but centripetal as well, or, rather, it is created at the intersection of the two forces. If freedom is to mean anything, it must enter the world (and, it must do something). If it is to mean something, it must proceed from situations in which it already finds itself. True, “we have indeed always the power to interrupt, but it implies in any case a power to begin, for there would be no severance unless freedom had
taken up its abode somewhere and were preparing to move it” (PhP 438).

Sartre’s view of freedom goes so far as to say that human choice confers all meaning and value on the world around us. Whether or not a large rock or crag is an obstacle to my climb or a vantage point from which to view the surroundings depends upon my choice. I, after all, choose the projects that determine the meaning of the crag. While this is true, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to claim that it is true only of our specific endeavors and not of our own body’s general relation to the world. True, I can choose whether or not to climb this crag before me, but what determines its character as an obstacle also has to do with its relations to the capacities of the human body. “Insofar as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent upon my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way which I do not choose” (PhP 440). In addition, because these intentions are related to the anonymous functions of the body, they carry with them certain general and social meanings. These intentions “are not simply mine, they originate from other than myself, and I am not surprised to find them in all psycho-physical subjects organized as I am” (PhP 440). Gestalt psychology, in fact, has shown that human perception is lawful in the sense that human beings perceive the world in typical ways. The dots below, for example, tend to be perceived as six pairs (PhP 440).

\[ \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \]

Now, neither Merleau-Ponty nor the Gestalt psychologists deny that other perspectives are possible, for neither denies that we can shift our perceptual perspective, yet this shift still relies on the given perceptual patterns and proceeds from them. Without these patterns “we would not have a world” but some sort of formless hyle (PhP 440). Thus, “there is an autochthonous significance of the world which is constituted in the dealings which our incarnate existence has with it, and which provides the ground of every deliberate Sinngebung” (PhP 441).

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty maintains, because human beings are creatures of habit, because we tend to slip into certain favored ways of interacting with the world and each other, we must recognize the statistical frequency with which these modes will appear. For Sartre, on the other hand, the probable does not really exist, since his subject projects all meaning and is thus free from deterministic patterns, even probable ones. For Merleau-Ponty there are stable patterns in perceptual, personal and social life. There are favored ways of perceiving the world as well as favored psychological and sociological ways of being-in-the-world, and if this is true, then we will be able to find a basis for the probable in experience itself. The probable is not just a fiction. We have just seen above that for Sartre there is total freedom or none at all. We are either totally free or totally determined, for within the context of his philosophy the interaction
between freedom and determinism are impossible. Yet, for Merleau-Ponty, as we see throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, human experience should not be pushed into such mutually exclusive categories. Human consciousness opens to the world through the body; or rather human consciousness is the body’s awareness of and openness upon the world. As such, human consciousness is a part of a situation that it blends into through the body, and that it is able to take up with at least a degree of awareness. Thus, humans are both conditioned and free, and at the same time.

We also find this same ambiguous mixture in the relationship between the individual and history. The individual as a free consciousness is never completely defined by social roles or objective social relationships, for individuals assimilate these conditions and yet attempt to move beyond them. Consequently, to properly account for a social event, such as a revolution, we must not appeal to objective conditions alone, for we must also understand how these social conditions are brought to awareness by the experiencing subject. In addition, to properly understand a social event, we must not reduce it to the abstract decisions arrived at by isolated subjects, for this returns to the Kantian “conditions of possibility” for something to occur, which we have already seen criticized above. What we must discover are the actual conditions of the revolution, not the possible conditions of any revolution—which are, after all, based on abstractions from actual events. The revolution is not before the subjects involved as a clear and distinct representation that is the same for all. Rather, individuals and groups tend to work toward the change and improved conditions that are elicited by the specifics of their actual situation. Of course, common links can be formed between individuals and groups, since many people within a particular society will have similar experiences and experience similar difficulties. Revolutionary movements are not blind. Human beings do act in the world with awareness and we do act with shared conscious goals in mind. Yet these goals are not based on the abstract judgments of isolated individuals and detached universal intellect. These goals begin with various lived-through conditions that frequently suggest their own resolution, if not positively as some circumstance to move toward, at least negatively as conditions which can no longer be tolerated.

Here again Merleau-Ponty speaks of an operative or lived-through intentionality that is the basis for the more abstract judgments of an intellectual project, and he mentions that the mistake of objective thought, either materialist or idealist, is that it by-passes this concrete and lived-through intentionality. Idealism especially “by-passes true intentionality, which is at its object rather than positing it. Idealism overlooks the... positive indeterminacy of these modes of consciousness...” (PhP 446). Intellectual intentionality and intellectual projects in general have the meaning they do because they are rooted in our operative or existential interaction with the world and others. However, for Merleau-Ponty, this does not mean that intellectual projects are *caused* by existential circumstances. Rather, they are motivated by them—and motivation does not eliminate freedom. I may for example be motivated to change my situation, yet this does not mean that I *must* change it. I may, like many, choose to live with it or even to reinterpret it.
Furthermore, the future that I envision, if I do seek change, is left open to a variety of possibilities. The lived world and my existential projects do not strictly determine certain possibilities; they suggest them. And while it is true that once a goal has been reached that I can look back and trace the path to its achievement, this path was not determined prior to its being traveled. It may be suggested along with others, but is only determined by the actual choices and steps taken along the way.

Of course, another issue here is the constitution of social relationships, how an individual relates to others to form social relations. The idealist, or at least the subjective idealist, may claim that the only thing each individual really has is his or her own experience, and consequently that there is no genuine experience of or relationships to the other. Yet, Merleau-Ponty counters, if we do have the experience of others, which we clearly do, there must be something in our experience that accounts for it, that motivates it.

“I must, therefore, in the most radical reflection, apprehend around my absolute individuality a kind of halo of generality or a kind of atmosphere of ‘sociality’. . . I must apprehend myself from the onset as centered in a way outside myself, and my individual existence must diffuse round itself, so to speak, an existence in quality. The For Themselves--me for myself and the other for himself--must stand out against a background of For Others--I for the other and the other for me. My life must have a significance which I do not constitute; there must strictly speaking be an intersubjectivity; each one of us must be both anonymous in the sense of absolutely individual [since no one knows exactly who I am or experiences my experience exactly as I do], and anonymous in the sense of absolutely general [since our experience opens out upon a public space]. Our being in the world is the concrete bearer of this double anonymity.” (PhP 448, my bracket additions)

I recognize around my personal life a public space, an atmosphere of generality. First of all, this is so because my personal life rests upon the general and anonymous functions of my body. My body carries me into the world whether I will it or not, and I am able to recognize its forms and functions in other human beings as well. It is, in fact, because we have similar bodies that open upon the world in similar ways that we are able to catch a glimpse of each other’s experiences. Secondly, since I experience my own experience as opening upon a public space, since I experience my own experience as a relationship to a public world, I can, at least to a certain extent, experience what others experience, for our consciousnesses meet or overlap at the thing—like, as we have already seen, two searchlights illuminating the same field. Thus, my experience opens to general significations or meanings that are shared by others, including the socially instituted meanings of our culture—the socially constituted role of teacher, husband, or friend. Moreover, it is these intersubjectively defined meanings that allow us to form a sense of history, which is not the result of some arbitrary decision on my part, nor merely the result of fortuitous events. “Which means that we confer upon history its significance, but not without its putting that significance forward itself. The Sinngebung is not merely centrifugal, which is why the subject of history is not the individual. There is an exchange between generalized and individual existence, each receiving and giving something” (PhP 450). The subject is born into the world of already constituted significations, takes them up, interprets them, and attempts to move them forward.
“We therefore recognize, around our initiatives and around that strictly individual project which is oneself, a zone of generalized existence and of projects already formed, significances which trail between ourselves and things and which confer upon us the quality of man, bourgeois or worker. Already generality intervenes, already our presence to ourselves is mediated by it and we cease to be pure consciousness, as soon as the natural or social constellation ceases to be unformulated this and crystallizes into a situation, as soon as it has a meaning— in short, as soon as we exist.” (PhP 450)

As the preceding passage indicates, general meaning crosses into the individual life, and vice versa, not only at the social level but at the level of natural perception as well. While it is true that the color red that I perceive before me fills my consciousness in a unique way, in a way that no one else can access directly, it is also true that for me to experience this red that my body must adjust to a certain wavelength and a certain vibration of light. I must use my body in a way that demonstrates a familiarity with the world of colors and with this particular modulation of my visual field. By using the anonymous powers of my body I am able to concretely experience the general field of colors. “The concrete color red, therefore, stands out against a background of generality, and this is why, even without transferring myself to another’s point of view, I grasp myself in perception as a perceiving subject, and not as unclassifiable consciousness” (PhP 451). The individual, then, has some sense of both the individuality and generality of experience even before taking up the perspective of other perceivers. The experience of red is mine because I experience it through my own body, which I direct and can move about in a way that I can direct no other body and no other consciousness can direct mine, and the experience of red is general because my body must adjust to general aspects of the world, in this case to the general quality of color.

What the above quote also indicates is that we must not begin, as Sartre does, with a consciousness that is totally unique and thus unclassifiable. We must not begin with a subject that is (for all practical purposes) outside of the body and the world, outside of time and the relationships with others. The reflection that gives the impression of an absolute flow of consciousness appearing like a stream beneath a detached (or totally free) subject is secondary, for it comes second in time and is derived from and subordinate to our more primary perceptual openness upon the world. This means that the flow of experience takes shape as the gaze of an incarnate consciousness opening upon a perceptual field, and it is only through its presence to the field, through which it is present to the world, that it is present to itself. The Visible and the Invisible says this even more explicitly, for the later text claims that if we focus on the tactile experience rather than visual experience, which gives the impression of being everywhere at once, and thus as detached from the body and its situatedness, we discover that the touch cannot occur without the body and therefore without being immersed in the world. To touch from the inside of the hand means to be touched from the outside by the world. Reflection on the tactile thus reveals that experience is our incarnate perception of a field that opens upon the world and others, reveals a field that I appear within and that is not simply spread before me as a detached knower or consciousness.
Furthermore, if the subject, as Sartre claims, creates itself at each moment, we may ask how it is that the moments of experience, by themselves, connect with each other, and how it is that they present a world, others, and a time that exists prior to the subject? First of all, what is given is not an isolated subject with an individual sense of temporality, but a public field, a temporality upon which the individual’s experience opens as a public dimension of reality. In Merleau-Ponty’s work time is a model for subjectivity, since both display an *ek-stasis*, a leaping out of the present toward a past and future that the present is a part of. The subject’s present moment of experience opens to something that includes it, the spatial/temporal dimension of the world.

[What we find, then,] “is the taking up of each subjectivity by itself, and of subjectivities by each other in the generality of a single nature, the cohesion of an intersubjective life and a world. The present mediates between the For Oneself and the For Others, between individuality and generality. True reflection presents me to myself not as idle and inaccessible subjectivity, but as identical with my presence in the world and to others, as I am now realizing it: I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and through them, all the rest.” (PhP 452)

For Merleau-Ponty, then, consciousness is not a nothingness, as it is for Sartre, for even in reflection consciousness is always present to itself as it is present to the world. Consciousness takes up the world and carries it forward, and it is in doing so that consciousness experiences its freedom, its freedom to interpret, its freedom to begin anew at each moment (PhP 452). For Sartre we are condemned to be free, since even not choosing is a sort of choice—in this case to maintain the *status quo*. The human subject is totally free at each moment to create him or herself and even the meaning of his or her own surroundings—which means that at each moment the subject is responsible for all meaning, including the meaning of nature, history and time. Contrarily, for Merleau-Ponty, if we recognize time as a dimension of reality, then we no longer need to recreate all of the meaning of nature, history, and self in each moment. According to Merleau-Ponty, a completely objective time, a time without subjective awareness, makes little sense, since there would be no awareness of the passing of time, only an eternal now. Yet, the subject does not create time but opens upon it as a natural dimension and helps bring it to awareness, for the subject is aware of the passing of time, of the present gradually shading into the past and toward the future. The subject, then, rests upon this pre-personal dimension and does not need to sustain it at each moment, as Sartre’s subject must. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “as long as we place in opposition, with no mediator, the For-itself and the In-itself, and fail to perceive, between ourselves and the world, this natural foreshadowing of a subjectivity, this pre-personal time which rests upon itself, acts are needed to sustain the upsurge of time, and everything becomes equally a matter of choice, the respiratory reflex no less than the moral decision . . .” (PhP 453). He proceeds to distinguish his view from Sartre’s. “As far as we are concerned, consciousness attributes this power of universal constitution to itself only if it ignores the event which provides its infrastructure and which is its birth. A consciousness for which the world ‘can be taken for granted’, which finds it ‘already
constituted’ and present even in consciousness itself, does not absolutely choose either its being or its manner of being” (PhP 453).

Human beings are never purely an in-itself or a for-itself. We are a mixture of the two. “The generality of the ‘role’ and of the situation comes to the aid of decision, and in this exchange between the situation and the person who takes it up, it is impossible to determine precisely the ‘share contributed by the situation’ and the ‘share contributed by freedom’” (PhP 453). We naturally synthesize the in-itself and the for-itself in the lived-through act. The lived present (in the wide sense discussed above) holds together subject and body, consciousness and world, just as it holds them apart. The present opens to a past and towards a future that runs beyond it yet with which it remains in contact. “By taking up a present, I draw together and transform my past, altering its significance, freeing and detaching myself from it. But I do so only by committing myself somewhere else . . . My freedom can draw life away from its spontaneous course, but only by a series of unobtrusive deflections which necessitate first of all following its course--not by any absolute creation” (PhP 455). I am born into certain natural and social situations. I am even born with a certain style or manner of being. These pregiven situations do not prevent my freedom but provide a way into it. For it is by taking up what I am that I am able to move in different directions.

To summarize, we have seen here in *Phenomenology of Perception*, in the book’s chapter on freedom, that Merleau-Ponty is critical of Sartre’s dualisms, of the for-itself and in-itself and of the for-itself and for another, as well as of Sartre’s stress on the radical freedom of the subject. According to Sartre, nothing external to me can determine who I am, for I decide the importance and meaning of these events. Even internal motive cannot determine my freedom, for, again, I choose the meaning of the motives and their power over me. For Sartre, the subject is the power of Sinn-Gebung, is the power to freely giving meaning. Merleau-Ponty more accurately argues that humans must be understood as a reciprocal and simultaneous exchange between centrifugal and centripetal forces. We are not free to interpret worldly situations anyway we wish because human consciousness is embodied and as such is subject to the forces of nature. We do not experience a formless field of nature (hyle) but typical perceptual patterns (see Gestalt laws of perception, not conceptual or logical laws). Moreover, humans also fall into patterned ways of acting and interacting with others. The body thus provides typical ways of perceiving and our habits provide typical ways of acting and interacting with others. Furthermore, since habits or typical ways of acting and interacting tend to become socially and culturally institutionalized, communities provide typical forms of behavior (from formal laws to customs to rules of etiquette, etc.). Here, individuals take up the typical patterns of social behavior that are available to them to make them their own and, sometimes, to move them in a different direction. Here, the individual and the social cross into and help define one another. With respect to the recognition of the other, Sartre does claim that we are immediately aware of the other because of “the look” of the other.115 I immediately recognize the power that the other has to see and “label” me this
or that. Yet for Sartre, the power that I give the other to label me is a power that I control. Yet still, I cannot
give the presence of the other, even though I am free to control the power the other has over me. Since
all others are also free, we are all basically free individual subjects with no real from of social alliance
between us. For Merleau-Ponty the other is likewise present in the individual’s perceptual field. Yet for
Merleau-Ponty the perceiving subject is aware of opening out upon a public world through his or her
perceiving body. Perception opens upon a public space, upon and within a field of time and space that runs
beyond the subject and that is open to the perceptions lived through by others. Moreover, the perceiving
subject is aware of other perceiving subjects because their perceiving bodies aim at and act within the world
in ways that are similar to my own meaningful encounters with the world. I am able to “couple” onto the
behavior of others. I am able to vicariously experience (to some extent, at least) their experience because it
opens to the same world as my behavior and in similar ways. This experience of another oriented, and thus
aware, human subject is given in the range of my experiences. Thus here we have some possibility of the
experience of intersubjectivity (which is not possible in Sartre’s philosophy, at least in the early
manifestations of it), with the individuals sharing the typical meanings of a specific social field, with the
individuals and the social “each receiving and giving something.” Merleau-Ponty has also pointed out the
difficulty Sartre’s has with temporality, for if the subject creates all meaning in each instant, as his position
implies, then we are left with the problem of connecting the instants. Yet, is the subject responsible for the
connection of the moments of experience? This seems unlikely. Merleau-Ponty provides a more plausible
explanation: my experience must be understood as opening upon a temporal/spatial field that I exist within.
I am not responsible for the synthesis of time and space, for they are synthesized within being, as my
experience helps reveal it. Overall, then, it makes more sense to say that we are a mixture of the for-itself
and in-itself rather than to set them apart as exclusive ontological categories.

*Adventures of the Dialectic*

*Adventures of the Dialectic* contains a lengthy chapter on Sartre entitled “Sartre and Ultrabolshevism.”
It represents a rather vigorous criticism of Sartre’s philosophy in general and of his social philosophy in
particular. It is approximately three to four times longer than the other chapters of *Adventures of the
Dialectic* and is rich in subtle analysis. The exposition provided here will summarize only a few of the
chapter’s main points.

Here, Merleau-Ponty once again argues that the elements of Sartre’s social ontology are too exclusive
for an individual to form any meaningful relationships with either other human beings or with nature.
Sartre’s theory of consciousness, in fact, is reminiscent of Descartes’, in the sense that it separates
consciousness from the world, from others, and even from the impulses of its own body, in order to attain,
in Descartes’ case, belief without doubt, in Sartre’s case, the radical freedom of individual consciousness.
Merleau-Ponty expresses Sartre’s view this way: “For Sartre, conscious awareness is an absolute. It gives
meaning,” and he immediately appeals to Marx for a claim that runs counter to the individual’s creation of all meaning, to a claim that grounds consciousness in the social and natural world. “For Marx, conscious awareness . . . has its place in history . . . At its birth it is already in a truth that judges it” (AD 115). Merleau-Ponty extends his appeal to the young Marx: “Marx . . . thought there were relationships between persons ‘mediated by things,’ and for him . . . all the realities of history . . . belonged to this mixed order. For Marx, there was, and for Sartre there is not, a coming-to-be of meaning in institutions. History is no longer for Sartre, as it was for Marx, a mixed milieu, neither things nor persons, where institutions are absorbed and transformed and where they decay” (AD 124). “In Sartre, there is a plurality of [free] subjects but there is no intersubjectivity” (AD 205). According to Merleau-Ponty, then, Sartre has no place for history to occur, for there is no true overlapping of one consciousness with another or of consciousness with nature. With Sartre’s view of the radical freedom of individual consciousness, each consciousness is responsible for everything that it is and does. Each consciousness is free to create all meaning.

“For [Sartre as well as for Husserl] . . . consciousness, which is constitution, does not find a system of already-present meanings in what it constitutes; it constructs or creates. The difference—and it is immense—is that Husserl sees even in this praxis an ultimate problem: even though consciousness constructs, it is conscious of making explicit something anterior to itself, it continues a movement begun in experience. ‘It is voiceless experience, which must be brought to the pure expression of its own meaning.’” (AD 138 note)

Here, Merleau-Ponty recognizes that Husserl’s philosophy, which is often thought of as more idealist than Sartre’s, must actually be regarded as more worldly. For consciousness, in Husserl’s view, does not create meaning ex nihilo. It opens out unto a world of at least partially constituted meanings in order to take them up and complete them.

Merleau-Ponty admits that some of Sartre’s pronouncements do get close to expressing the interworld, the milieu which is a mixed combination of things and consciousness, as may be witnessed in Sartre’s following claim: “We dominate the environment by work, but the environment dominates us in turn by the rigidified swarm of thoughts we have inscribed there” (AD 139, quoted by Merleau-Ponty). Yet Merleau-Ponty continues to claim that this does not get Sartre any closer to Marx, since for Marx this mixed milieu contains social tensions that can constrict or relax, while for Sartre “social intentions” disappear as soon as the individual reflects. For Sartre, there are no social intentions or institutions, there are only individuals with intentions (AD 139-140). Contrarily, Merleau-Ponty makes the following claim.

“For [Marx] it is indeed man who makes the unity of the world, but man is everywhere, inscribed on all the walls and in all the social apparatuses made by him. Men can see nothing about them that is not in their image. They therefore do not at every moment have to reassemble and recreate themselves, and this is why there is sense in asking whether the movement comes from them or from things...Their landscape is animated; it is there, as well as in them, that tension accumulates. That is also why the lightening flash which will give its decisive meaning to all this is not for Marx a private happening in each consciousness. It goes from one to the other, the current passes, and what is called becoming conscious or revolution is the advent of an interworld.” (AD 143)
For Merleau-Ponty, social and historical analysis must somehow account for this institution of human meaning and action, must account for certain established habitual ways of interpreting and acting in the world. This analysis must recognize the inertia of history, its density, which is not the density of a pure thing (a pure in-itself), as well as recognize its human meaning, which is not a meaning purely constituted by an isolated individual (by a pure for-itself). Furthermore, in order to be complete, this analysis must supply an ontology that will accommodate and allow for this mixed milieu of human meanings. Merleau-Ponty provides this ontology, as we have seen above, in his major philosophical works and in the preceding chapters of *Adventures of the Dialectic*. Sartre’s social ontology remains to exclusionary, with its dualistic ontology of pure consciousness set against pure matter, and its emphasis on the radical freedom of individual consciousness.

We can see the difference between the two philosophers more clearly if we consider Merleau-Ponty’s comment on their respective views of freedom. As we have already seen, Sartre’s view of the freedom of consciousness is total, for it can create any meaning it wishes, without regard to its body, its past, others or the world. As we have already witnessed in *Phenomenology of Perception*, particularly in its closing chapter on freedom, for Merleau-Ponty the freedom of individual consciousness is never total, since consciousness is necessarily embodied and necessarily opens upon a pre-existent world, both natural and social. *Adventures of the Dialectic* expresses his view as follows.

“My thoughts and the sense I give to my life are always caught in a swarm of meanings which have already established me in a certain position with regard to others and to events at the moment when I attempt to see clearly. And, of course, these infrastructures are not destiny; my life will transform them. But if I have a chance to go beyond them and become something other than this bundle of accidents, it is not by deciding to give my life this or that meaning; rather it is by attempting simply to live what is offered me.” (AD 197)

We cannot throw off our past or completely break with it. Yet what we can do is “interrupt” it. We do not have to continue to blindly “act out” behavioral patterns formed in the past (as children sometimes do), because we can gain a reflective awareness of them. With the help of reflective awareness, and much concerted effort, established patterns of behavior can be gradually changed. However, we cannot simply wave a wand of free will (as Sartre seems to think we can do) to eliminate, or change, or totally free ourselves from the past. Freedom, for Merleau-Ponty, as we have seen in his earlier work, is the ability to consciously take up our past, our character, and our habitual forms of organizing our world to use them as instruments to make sense of our world, to use them as means of expression. This conscious resumption of the past has a freeing quality to it because it is no longer simply a blind repetition but a useful instrument that can be continually sublated.

In his effort to challenge the Cartesian and Sartrean “detachment” of consciousness, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to argue that consciousness “is in fact what it does” (AD 198). “Whether it is a question of action
or even of thought, the fruitful modes of consciousness are those in which the object does not need to be
posited, because consciousness inhabits it and is at work in it, because each response the outside gives to
the initiatives of consciousness is immediately meaningful for it and gives rise to a new intervention on its
part . . . ” (AD 198). Consciousness for Merleau-Ponty is not the Cartesian ego cut off from the world and
aware only of its own representations. Rather, it is rather a relationship to the world; it is être a, an aware
bodily being-at the world. Consciousness is primarily the body’s active being in the world. It is praxis.

Further characterizing the difference between the Sartre’s view of consciousness and his own,
Merleau-Ponty makes the following claim. “A meaning, if it is posited by a consciousness whose whole
essence is to know what it does, is necessarily closed. Consciousness leaves no corner of it unexplored.
And if, on the contrary, one definitely admits of open, incomplete meanings the subject must not be pure
presence to itself and to the object” (AD 198). As we observe in Merleau-Ponty’s study of language, there
can be no full presence of consciousness to itself or of the object to consciousness, for presence is always
occurs within a context, within difference; presence always appears against a gestalt background of
differential and shifting temporal and spatial elements that help articulate it as the foreground. Moreover,
as Merleau-Ponty says in The Invisible and the Invisible, the lines of force between the background and the
foreground are themselves not fully present or visible. They are the “invisible” shifting lines of force
between the background and foreground. These lines shift with the participation of the perceiving body
subject, a body subject that is itself situated in a certain concrete time and place. As the body subject changes
perspective with respect to time and place, the figure shifts against the background. The experiencing body
subject thus participates in the perceptual gestalt and the form it takes; it participates in and helps create the
lines of force between the foreground and background that help present the foreground. The perceptual
norms through which the body perceives, the levels according to which the world appears, Merleau-Ponty
calls existentials (VI 171, 180, 248, 257). Here in Adventures of the Dialectic, using language that we have
also seen above, he states that “a perceived thing . . . [is simply] a certain variation in relation to a norm or
to a spatial, or colored level, it is a certain distortion, a certain ‘coherent deformation’ of the permanent
links which unite us to sensorial fields and to the world” (AD 198). Therefore, the perceived thing is not
fully present to a consciousness that is fully present to itself. It presents itself as a stable yet shifting
perceptual pattern to a body subject that is primarily a perceptual openness upon the world.

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to make similar claims, first about human actions, then about consciousness
and its relations to others.

“Like perceived things my tasks are presented to me, not as objects or ends, but as reliefs and configurations,
that is to say, in the landscape of praxis . . . [Moreover] if one takes into account a consciousness thus
engaged, which is joined again with itself only across its historical and worldly field, which does not touch
itself or coincide with itself but rather is divined and glimpsed in the present experience, of which it is the
invisible steward, the relationship between consciousnesses take on a completely new aspect. For if the
subject is not the sun from which the world radiates or the demiurge of my pure objects, if its signifying
activity is rather the perception of a difference between two or several meanings—inconceivable, then, without dimensions, levels, and perspectives which the world and history establish around me—then its action and all actions are possible only as they follow the cause of the world . . .” (AD 199, my bracket addition)

For Merleau-Ponty, then, there is no coincidence either of consciousness with itself or of consciousness with things. Since consciousness is the body’s openness unto the world, in order to see or touch, the body must be capable of being seen or touched. There is a crisscross or partial blending of touching and the touched, the seer and the seen. Yet, the body as toucher or seer never exactly coincides with the body as touched or seen, for, as we have seen, experience is caught in something that runs beyond it, the temporal/spatial field of the world. This lived-through field, because it has horizons that always remain open, can never be captured as a fully present object because reflection upon it necessarily occurs in time. For Merleau-Ponty, then, the only way the subject can experience itself is by glimpsing itself across the field of lived experience, which is its primary mode of being and always presents itself as existing prior to reflection.

Merleau-Ponty continues by further differentiating his philosophy from Sartre’s, now explicitly addressing the possibility of intersubjectivity.

“At the very heart of my perspective, I realize that my private world is already being used, that there is ‘behavior’ that concerns it, and that the other’s place in it is already prepared, because I find other historical situations to be occupiable by me. A consciousness that is truly engaged in a world and a history on which it has a hold but which go beyond it is not insular. Already in the thickness of the sensible and historical fabric it feels other presences moving, just as the group of men who dig a tunnel hear the work of another group coming toward them.” (AD 199-200)

Within Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, the body subject only gains access to the world and to others through its own perspective. Yet, instead of this perspective being the means by which the subject is excluded from the world and others (as with Descartes and Sartre), it provides access to them. Since consciousness is a bodily relationship to the world, and, furthermore, since individual consciousness rests on the body’s anonymous functions, the individual’s experience opens to a world that includes it and others. Just as the profiles of my perception of the university library slip into one another as I walk around its exterior, so also my perspectives slip into those of other people as theirs slip into mine, for each perspective opens upon a publicly available field, a world that we can communicate about and manipulate together with a great deal of success.

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to make the following claim about such an engaged bodily consciousness interacting with others in a common world.

“A consciousness that is truly engaged in a world and a history on which it has a hold but which go beyond it is not insular. Already in the thickness of the sensible and historical fabric it feels other presences moving, just as the group of men who dig a tunnel hear the work of another group coming toward them. Unlike the Sartrean consciousness, . . . consciousness can see [the other], at least out of the corner of its eye. Between
its perspective and that of the other there is a link and an established way of crossing over . . . Neither in private nor in public history is the formula of these relationships ‘either him or me,’ the alternative of solipsism or pure abnegation, because these relationships are no longer the encounter of two For-Itselfs but are the meshing of two experiences which, without ever coinciding, belong to a single world.” (AD 200, my bracket addition)

The foregoing makes it clear that Merleau-Ponty believes that Sartre’s theory of consciousness cannot account for the interaction of consciousnesses and the formation of a common world and history. In fact, he concludes his chapter on Sartre by even more explicitly making this claim.

“The question is to know whether, as Sartre says, there are only men and things or whether there is also the interworld, which we call history, symbolism, truth-to-be-made. If one sticks to the dichotomy, men, as the place where all meaning arises, are condemned to an incredible tension. Each man, in literature as well as in politics, must assume all that happens instant by instant to all others; he must be immediately universal. If, on the contrary, one acknowledges a mediation of personal relationships through the world of human symbols . . . , if, on the contrary, one agrees that no action assumes as its own all that happens, that it does not reach the event itself, that all actions, even war, are always symbolic actions and count as much upon the effect they will have as a meaningful gesture and as the mark of an intention as upon the direct results of the event—if one thus renounces ‘pure action,’ which is a myth (and a myth of the spectator consciousness), perhaps it is then that one has the best chance of changing the world.” (AD 200-201)

According to Merleau-Ponty, then, the basic terms of Sartre's philosophy are view is too exclusive, for these terms separate consciousness from the world, others, from its own body and even from the past. For Sartre consciousness is not subject to external influences and is (ultimately) free to create all meaning. Here in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Merleau-Ponty counters Sartre’s claim with an appeal to Marx’s mixed milieu, to the region of intersubjectivity that contains established practices that are mixed with things. Throughout all the chapters of *Adventures of the Dialectic* history unfolds as the relationship between people mediated by things, and, throughout the chapter on Sartre we have seen that Sartre’s social ontology cannot account for these exchanges. Merleau-Ponty attempts to provide a social ontology that can. Since the natural world is impressed with human meanings, and since the social world is replete with customary ways of acting and interacting, there is a social atmosphere that is not simply the creation of an isolated consciousness. Conscious individuals live in this atmosphere. They intersect with it, and because they intersect with it, the tensions that appear in the atmosphere can also fuse into them—and vice versa. The increased awareness of and participation in this atmosphere Marx called revolution. It is this social atmosphere that Merleau-Ponty emphasizes in Marx writings, it is the individual’s interaction with this social atmosphere that he works out and refines in his later writings, and it is this social atmosphere that escapes Sartre’s dichotomous social ontology.

The difference between Sartre’s and Merleau-Ponty’s social ontology was made more explicit by considering their respective views of freedom. For Sartre, an isolated consciousness is free to create all meaning, while for Merleau-Ponty an incarnate subject opens to and is caught in a web of already established meanings, meanings that are taken up and “deformed” in order to express something new. For
Merleau-Ponty consciousness is primarily a bodily relation to the world. It is not a pure for-itself, as it is for Sartre. For Merleau-Ponty, there is no direct presence of consciousness to itself or to its object—as in the Cartesian tradition. Consciousness as a relationship to the world opens to a field of differential elements, to a shifting spatial and temporal gestalt. Perceptual consciousness necessarily outruns, both spatially and temporally, all reflection upon it. Consciousness is thus in contact with itself only across this open spatial and temporal field. Consciousness is a recognition of and participation in a field of differential meanings—both perceptual and social. Incarnate consciousness takes up this perceptual world and social atmosphere in order to live, to express, and to create its own meaning. Incarnate subjects interact with each other in this natural and social atmosphere in order to gain recognition, and it is in this exchange that freedom is expressed and history occurs.

**The Visible and the Invisible**

*The Visible and Invisible*, Chapter 2, Interrogation and Dialectic, devoted to a discussion of Sartre’s philosophy, opens with a reference to “perceptual faith.” It is right, Merleau-Ponty says, that philosophy has made the effort to suspend our belief in perception, to reflect upon it, in order to better understand it. Yet this reflection goes wrong when it transforms perception into “reasons” grasped or constructed by abstract thought expressed in propositions and sentences. Since perception is not an intellectual, linguistic representation, since this approach does not help us understand perception but obscures it, our perceptual relationship to the world must be understood differently. Sartre makes this attempt (VI 51).

As he did in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Merleau-Ponty once again presents Sartre’s position as an ontological dualism, a dualism of consciousness and world, of the for-itself and the in-itself, of nothingness and being. According to Sartre, consciousness is immanence, transparent, clear to itself, yet empty, a nothingness, with the world as completely transcendent, completely outside of consciousness (VI 51). Moreover, the nothingness of consciousness means that there is no ego or self within or behind it. Since consciousness is pre-reflective subjectivity, by its very nature it is not an object before a reflective ego. It is pure subjectivity, purely the flow of subjective experience, and this means that it is simply an opening out upon the plenitude of being. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty proceeds, “it is with this intuition of Being as absolute plenitude and absolute positivity, and with a view of nothingness purified of all the being we mix into it, that Sartre expects to account for our primordial access to the things . . .” (VI 52). In fact, “the intuition of being is solidary with a sort of negintuition of nothingness . . ., with the impossibility of our reducing ourselves to anything whatever— a state of consciousness, thought, an ego, or even a ‘subject.’” Thus, as Sartre frames his philosophy, his philosophy of negation is a philosophy of Being (VI 53). Yet, even though an intertwining of nothingness and being is impossible given mutually exclusive terms of his ontology, nothingness and being, Sartre claims, cannot be thought without each other (VI 55).
Consciousness knows itself only in a concrete situation, only as that which is not the things upon which it opens (VI 56).

Moreover, even though my consciousness opens me to the world through my situation, and even though I am aware that my visible exterior is open to the perceptions of others, in Sartre’s philosophy I have no direct and positive experience of the consciousness of the other (VI 61). This of course also means that there is really no world that is shared between us. Yet, according to Sartre, because the other, as a nothingness, opens upon a situation, just as I do, this creates some “shared” space for me and the other and even for the intervention of third parties. Subjectivity, Sartre claims, is defined through contact with a situation, and this exposes the subject to “the look” of the other and also exposes the subject’s relationships to others to possible objectification by third parties (VI 63).

Departing from his exposition of Sartre’s philosophy, and more critically now, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to state that “it is in appearance only that the immanent consciousness and the transcendence of being are reconciled by an analytic of Being and Nothingness: it is not being that is transcendent, it is I who hold it at arm’s length by a sort of abnegation; it is not the world that is thick, it is I who am agile enough to make it be yonder” (VI 70). Moreover, while it is true that “the look” of the other wrenches me out of the flow of my own subjective experience, for Sartre, this occurs only if I allow this to take place (VI 71). Thus, as Merleau-Ponty sees it, Sartre’s philosophy remains a subjectivism with no real, meaningful exchange between consciousness and thing, or, for that matter, between consciousnesses. Binary oppositions, Merleau-Ponty says, remain in Sartre’s philosophy in all their rigor (VI 70).

Merleau-Ponty continues, raising other critical questions regarding Sartre’s notion of the for-itself: is the *cogito* of Sartre’s philosophy simply our pre-reflective experience? If so, it is difficult to see how it is nothingness, for it is filled with the thickness of experience. Or, is the *cogito* prior to this pre-reflective experience, behind it in some sense, something Sartre wants to avoid. These issues are never resolved in Sartre’s philosophy. Furthermore, and more generally, “either the analytic of being and nothingness is an idealism and does not give us the brute or pre-reflective being we seek, or, if it is something else, this is because it goes beyond and transforms the initial definitions” (VI 76).

Moving to the development and expression of his own thought, here relative to Sartre’s and the character of the *cogito*, Merleau-Ponty states that “it is necessary and it suffices that the other’s body which I see and his word which I hear, which are given to me as immediately present in my field, do present to me in their own fashion what I will never be present to, what will always be invisible to me, what I will never directly witness—an absence therefore, but not just any absence, a certain absence and a certain difference in terms of dimensions which are from the first common to us . . .” (VI 82). For Merleau-Ponty there is thus a recognition of the other, of another human consciousness, yet without direct access to the other’s consciousness. I am aware of another consciousness, yet as an absence, as something that I do not
have direct access to, because I am aware of another *gesturing body* that opens upon and engages with the world as I do. Our embodied consciousnesses open upon and participate in the same public space, the same public world, but do so from different angles, from different perspectives. Thus, even though I cannot literally think another person’s thoughts, I can perceive another perceiving being, as his or her act of perception open upon the same world between us. As Merleau-Ponty expresses it here, the other “can look at me — me, the invisible— only because we belong to the same system of being for itself and being for another; we are moments of the same syntax, we count in the same world, we belong to the same Being” (VI 83). For Merleau-Ponty, my experience is a part of and rests upon the anonymous functions of the human body as it carries me into a public world whether I will it or not. True, my experience is individuated within this public field. No one else experiences my experience exactly as I do. Yet since I experience my experience as primarily opening out upon a public space, I can catch a glimpse of the experiences lived through by others because they meet out in the world, like search lights illuminating the same field but from different angles. Sartre’s ontology of the for-itself and the in-itself, and of the for-itself and for-another, cannot accommodate this explanation, cannot account for a shared world, for in his philosophy the public world is something that *my* agility helps make yonder, with the power that the other has over me ultimately the power that I *give* to the other. Sartre’s philosophy remains a subjectivism (VI 83).

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty argues, being In-itself-for-itself is more than imaginary, as Sartre maintains. The imaginary breaks up, even disappears, with inspection and analysis. (VI 85) The world does not. It remains even if particular perceptions prove to be false. Merleau-Ponty continues with the following claim.

“Our point of departure shall not be being is, nothingness is not . . . but: there is being, there is a world, there is something; in the strong sense in which the Greek speaks of τὸ λέγειν, there is cohesion, there is meaning. One does not arouse being from nothingness, *ex nihilo*; one starts with an ontological relief where one can never say that the ground be nothing. What is primary is not the full and positive being upon a ground of nothingness; it is a field of appearances, each of which, taken separately, will perhaps subsequently break up or be crossed out (this is the part of nothingness), but of which I only know that it will be replaced by another which will be the truth of the first, because there is a world, because there is something—a world, a something, which in order to be do not first have to nullify the nothing.” (VI 88)117

The world does not arise because of my nothingness, out of my consciousness as a nothingness, but, rather, I experience the world as always already there, as a worldly presence that I exist within. Moreover, Sartre’s ontological categories of nothingness and being are too abstract. They can perhaps be thought of as an introduction to a process, with the subject and object becoming more and more intertwined and more and more concrete. This process we call the dialectic, and it is a process that we do not really find in Sartre’s philosophy, for nothingness and being remain Sartre’s primary terms, remain terms that are primarily fixed, and mutually exclusive (VI 79).
“In sum, therefore, whether in the relations within being or in the relations of being with me, dialectical thought is that which admits that each term is itself only by proceeding toward the opposed term, becomes what it is through the movement, that it is one and the same thing for each to pass into the other or to become itself, to leave itself or to retire into itself, that the centripetal movement and the centrifugal movement are one sole movement, because each term is its own mediation, the exigency for a becoming, and even for an auto-destruction which gives the other.” (VI 90-91)

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to state here that it is just this sort of dialectical thinking that has alluded Sartre and that he has tried to apply to Sartre’s “dichotomy of Being and Nothingness?” (VI 91) His stance here towards Sartre, it appears, seems more amiable than it did in Adventures of the Dialectic. In a sense, he is here providing the dialectic that Sartre needs to correct Being and Nothingness, in order to provide the dialectic that he needs for the Critique of Dialectical Reason. As we have seen, within Sartre’s philosophy, the openness upon being in-itself is really nothingness, for the anonymous observer in me, “pushes before itself a zone of void where being no longer is, but is seen. It is therefore my constitutive nothingness that makes the distance from being as well as its proximity . . .” (VI 99). This must be corrected, Merleau-Ponty says, for the horizon of the perceptual world is there because my perception opens upon the world, not because my vision, my nothingness, holds something at arm’s length (VI 100). Criticizing Sartre, now with a further nod to his own position, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to state that philosophy “cannot reconstruct the thing and the world by condensing in them . . . everything we have subsequently been able to think and say of them; rather, it remains a question, it interrogates the world and the thing, it revives, repeats, or imitates their crystallization before us. For this crystallization which is partly given to us ready-made is in other respects never terminated, and thereby we can see how the world comes about. It takes form under the domination of certain structural laws . . .” (VI 100). Philosophy is necessarily interrogative, for it is always in pursuit of an ongoing process, a process that is stable but whose terms continually refer beyond themselves to be themselves. In Sartre philosophy, his basic terms remain fixed.

Here in The Visible and the Invisible, we have seen that Merleau-Ponty once again remains critical of Sartre’s ontological dualisms, of the for-itself and the in-itself and of the for-itself and for-another, as well as of Sartre’s continued stress on the freedom of the individual subject. Conscious is still an immanence set against a transcendent nature in-itself. With this for-itself and in-itself, Merleau-Ponty says, Sartre expects to account for our “primordial access” to the world. Yet, Merleau-Ponty points out that what Sartre claims to achieve along these lines is really only “apparent,” for Sartre still explains the world’s transcendence as something brought about by the subject, by the subject’s own abnegation. Moreover, even though Sartre’s later works (more on this below) recognize the other, and even some sense of intersubjectivity or of shared goals, he still adheres to a social ontology of isolated individuals, with intersubjectivity induced by “the look” or threat of some third party or group and “chosen” by the isolated individual. Of course, we have seen that Merleau-Ponty not only criticizes Sartre’s position but also
develops an alternative philosophy, one that recognizes from the start that embodied individuals immediately open upon a shared public world, to a world of which they are always already a part. Furthermore, we have also seen that Merleau-Ponty points out that Sartre cannot develop a meaningful dialectic by starting with, or, rather, by rigorously maintaining, dualisms of the for-itself and in-itself and of the for-itself and for-another. A truly dialectical philosophy is a philosophy that attempts to understand terms as relational, and to understand terms in all their on-going relationships.

**Summary of Merleau-Ponty’s three text criticism of Sartre**

Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Sartre in the three texts considered above remains consistent, even given the supposed changes in Sartre’s philosophy, which will be addressed below. We have seen throughout that Merleau-Ponty remains critical of Sartre’s dualisms, of his ontological dualism of the for-itself and the in-itself, and of the dualism of the for-itself and the for-another, as well as the radical freedom that Sartre accords to individual subjects. Contrarily, Merleau-Ponty seeks to describe not only how the embodied subject and world are intertwined but also how individual subjects are able to share a public space. Moreover, given that this is the case, the individual’s freedom must interface with forces of nature as well as with present social conditions. Individuals meet and take up natural and social conditions and, usually with great effort, are sometimes able to move them (particularly social conditions) in a different direction. To use a sailing metaphor, for Merleau-Ponty our boats must contend with the currents of the ocean and with the prevailing winds of the atmosphere. We can use the forces to direct our ship in various directions but we cannot escape them. For Sartre, we seem to be free to move our boats anywhere we wish, regardless of our circumstances. While the freedom of the individual is addressed through Merleau-Ponty’s three primary texts on Sartre, we have seen that it is treated at length in *Phenomenology of Perception*. In *Adventures of the Dialectic* Merleau-Ponty repeats his earlier criticisms of Sartre’s dualism and argues that given his starting point makes it impossible to develop an adequate theory of intersubjectivity and of the social movement of human history. Citing Marx favorably, Merleau-Ponty argues that history must be understood as relationships between people mediated by things. Sartre’s dualism cannot adequately account for the truly intersubjective event, whereby individuals working in concert with each other, with shared goals, transform nature together. Moreover, Sartre’s radical view of individual freedom, that the individual at each moment is responsible for his or her own interpretation of events, precludes the cohesion of social meaning through time. In *The Visible and Invisible* Merleau-Ponty remains critical of Sartre’s dualisms and here stresses that, given the rigidity of these dualisms, a truly dialectical philosophy is not possible.

**Simone de Beauvoir’s Criticisms of Merleau-Ponty (on Sartre’s behalf)**

Simone de Beauvoir rather vigorously (and even angrily) maintains that Merleau-Ponty does not give an accurate portrayal of Sartre’s philosophy. She claims against Merleau-Ponty that Sartre’s philosophy is not a philosophy of the subject, of a free for-itself, set against nature in-itself, since for Sartre the subject
is always embedded in a situation. (Debate 449) She also claims that his philosophy of history accounts for the difficult move from one historical situation to another by appealing to purposeful human projects. (See Debate 465 for her favorable comparison of Sartre to Marx) She cites many passages from Sartre’s work “demonstrating” that Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation is wrong.

**In Defense of Merleau-Ponty**

Fully aware of Sartre’s philosophy, what Merleau-Ponty claims is that Sartre still adheres to his dualistic ontology of the for-itself and in-itself (which makes their coming together problematic), and the exclusive experiences of for-oneself and for-another, (which makes their coming together in an intersubjective field problematic), while, in each case, maintaining a preference for the individual subject. (See AD 139-140 and below.) Moreover, the exclusivity of these pairs renders a philosophy of history problematic.

Let us look at a few passages to confirm the above point. True, as de Beauvoir says, “Sartre has always insisted on the reciprocal conditioning of the world and that of Ego . . .” (Debate 450). Merleau-Ponty is certainly aware of this but finds another tendency on Sartre’s thought, as is indicated in the flowing passage drawn from *Adventures of the Dialectic*.

“Sartre has always thought that nothing could be the cause of an act of consciousness. In the past Sartre spoke at least of ‘mild forces’ and ‘motives.’ Today he still speaks of ‘the reciprocal conditioning of both progressive impoverishment and permanent revolution,’ [CP 278] but for him this is statistical and secondary thought. In all strictness, the proletarian is not the condition of the militant, and the fact that the revolutionary will does not arise completely armed out of misery is enough for Sartre to act as if it did not arise from it at all, and to see it appear *ex nihilo* as an ‘invention,’ a refusal of the worker's condition, a ‘conversion’ by which the worker ‘dies and is reborn.’ Lagneau said that to live will always be to take the trouble to live. He who takes this trouble is not the worker overwhelmed with misery and fatigue. It is that in him, beyond despair and also beyond hope, that says ‘no’ to this life and transforms it into another. One must not even speak of decision here, that is to say, of the deliberation between possibilities and of the motives which prefigure it. ‘Freedom has descended on me like an eagle’ is more or less what Orestes said in *The Flies*. In the same way, the revolutionary will of the militant is more himself than his life. It does not come out of what he was but out of the future, out of nonbeing, where from now on he places himself.” (AD 106, my bracket addition) 121

Obviously Merleau-Ponty’s point here is that Sartre view of the freedom of the individual trumps the reciprocal exchange between the subject and his or her environment. He continues.

“Because for Sartre the other is not a vague double of myself, because, born in the field of my life, the other overturns it, decents my freedom, and destroys me in order to make me reappear over there, in a gaze which is fastened on me, it is not, as with Kant, beyond this life, or even, as with Lagneau, prior to life...; it is in this life . . . Yet, at this very moment and in this passing to the outside, something attests to the fact that we remain within the philosophy of the subject. It is precisely that the Party, like the militant, is pure action. If everything comes from freedom, if the workers are nothing, not even proletarians, before they create the Party, the Party rests on nothing that has been established, not even on their common history.” (AD 108)
Alright, good, for Sartre the other is present to the subject in life and not beyond or prior to it, yet, since for Sartre the individual’s freedom must remain unconditioned, the will of the worker remains unconditioned, i.e., not rooted in actual events. Here again the idea of reciprocal exchange between the subject and environment is bypassed for the idea of a completely free subject.

Later in *Adventures of the Dialectic* Merleau-Ponty comments on Sartre’s resistance to the thought of social intentions.

“For Marx, good and evil come from the same source, which is history. For Sartre, the social whole never starts moving by itself, never yields more movement than it has received from ‘inassimilable’ and ‘irreducible’ consciousnesses; . . . It is because in reality, for him, as soon as one reflects, there is nothing there. Intentions without consciousness are phantasms. Intention without consciousness: this monster, this myth, is a way of expressing that, reflecting on events, I find a meaning which could have been put there either by myself or by another subject . . . There is no real intention in the social whole, no meaning immanent in signs. Sartre has not changed since *The Psychology of the Imagination* [in 1940], \(^{122}\) where he rigidly distinguished between the ‘certain,’ the meanings of pure consciousness, and the ‘probable,’ that which emerges from the phenomenological experience; or, if he has changed, it is in the sense that he expects even less of the probable.” (AD 140, my bracket addition)

Merleau-Ponty is here pointing out Sartre’s inability to develop an adequate philosophy of history because he lacks any notion of social whole, of meaning and intentions in social institutions, in culture or linguistic signs, because he will not relinquish his hold on the pure consciousness of the individual. We also see Merleau-Ponty mention explicitly that Sartre’s ideas have not really changed since his early1940 emphasis on the “meanings of pure consciousness.” Of course, Merleau-Ponty here also means that Sartre’s ideas have not changed since *Being and Nothingness* (*L’Être et le néant*), published in 1943, and he states this explicitly a few pages later in *Adventures of the Dialectic*.

“Contrary to appearances, being-for-itself is all Sartre has ever accepted, with its inevitable correlate: pure being-in-itself. The mixed forms of the For Others [*du Pour Autrui*] urge us at every moment to think about ‘how nothingness comes into the world.’ But the truth is that it does not come into the world or that it remains there only for a moment. Ultimately there is pure being, natural and immobile in itself, a limpid mystery which limits and adds an outside to the transparency of the subject or suddenly congeals and destroys this transparency when I am looked at from outside. But even then there is no hinge, no joint or mediation, between myself and the other; I feel myself to be looked at immediately, I take this passivity as my own but at the same time reintegrate it into my universe.” (AD 142)

Merleau-Ponty’s claim here is that Sartre’s earlier philosophy, with its exclusive categories of for-itself and in-itself, and for-oneself and for-others, remains too exclusive to be able to form an adequate social philosophy or philosophy of history, ultimately because Sartre’s defaults to the freedom of the for-itself.

**Interview with Sartre, 1975**\(^{123}\)

Here are a number of statements by Sartre that are pertinent to the topic at hand, i.e., to Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Sartre’s philosophy as remaining tied to the dualism of nothingness and being, with an emphasis on the freedom of the individual subject. “I consider myself a Cartesian philosopher, at least in *L’Être et le Néant*,” Sartre says (Int 8), and proceeds to mention that he discovered the dialectic late
in his philosophical development: “After L’Etre et le Néant” (Int 9). He proceeds to say that he tried to give an account of it in Critique de la raison dialectique (Int18). He also mentions that he does not think there is a break in his thought, even though there is evolution, and that his “great discovery was that of the sociality during the war, since to be a soldier at the front is really to be a victim of a society that keeps you where you do not want to be and gives you laws you don't want” (Int 11, 12-13). Furthermore, he states, “since I believe only in individual consciousness and not in a collective consciousness, it is impossible for me to provide, just like that, a collective consciousness as historical synthesis” (Int 19). Moreover, he states explicitly that his ontology “has not changed. L’Etre et le Néant deals with ontology, not the Critique de la raison dialectique” (Int 41). To the claim that Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Sartre missed “an interworld” (that is, an intersubjectivity) in his philosophy, Sartre responds: “I admit neither that I have the same philosophy as Merleau-Ponty nor that there is this element of interworld” (Int 43). And finally, Sartre is asked if he thinks Merleau-Ponty’s criticisms stem from a misunderstanding or from genuine and fundamental differences between their philosophies. He provides the following answer.

“I believe that there is a fundamental incompatibility, because behind his analyses Merleau-Ponty is always referring to a kind of being for which he invokes Heidegger and which I consider to be absolutely invalid. The entire ontology that emerges from the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty is distinct from mine. It is much more a continuum than mine. I am not much of a continuist; the in-itself, the for-itself, and the intermediary forms that we talked about a moment ago -- that is enough for me. For Merleau-Ponty, there is a relation to being that is very different, a relation in the very depths of oneself.” (Int 43)

He also states, a little further on, that in his philosophy, unlike in Merleau-Ponty’s, “consciousness is not engulfed in a body nor is the body engulfed in the world” (Int 44).

These passages demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty’s claim that Sartre’s ontology remains dualistic is accurate, and, if this is so, then Sartre’s attempt to develop an interworld, a meeting point between subject and object and a meeting point between self and others (an intersubjectivity), or a genuine exchange between consciousness and nature, remains problematic.

**Another criticism of Merleau-Ponty:** Remy Kwant, a first-rate expositor and interpreter of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, questions why Merleau-Ponty did not take into account Sartre’s Critique when he was writing The Visible and the Invisible? Merleau-Ponty persists in citing Sartre’s Being and Nothingness. Kwant states that The Visible and the Invisible chapter on Sartre, entitled “Interrogation and Dialectic,” was written in “1959 or 1960,” and proceeds to make the following claim.

“In the meantime Sartre had published Critique of Dialectical Reason, which is a long exposition of dialectical thought as well as a philosophy of history. Merleau-Ponty was obviously aware of this book. In a note of June, 1960, he wrote that Sartre’s philosophy of history is based on the practice of the individual [VI 256]; this evidently refers to Sartre’s Critique of Dialectical Reason. It is one of Sartre’s main theses there that the practice of the individual is the raison constitutante, i.e., the principle of the intelligibility, of history. This book implies some important changes in Sartre’s philosophy. It is remarkable, therefore, that in the chapter in The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau-Ponty does not confront himself with the Critique of Dialectical Reason.” (Kwant 131, my bracket addition)
Yet, according to an editorial note written by Merleau-Ponty’s close friend and posthumous editor, Claude Lefort, the primary text of *The Visible and the Invisible* was composed in March and June of 1959 (although there are “working notes” written as late as 1961). Obviously, this means that the March and June 1959 composition was written before the 1960 publication of Sartre’s *Critique*. Merleau-Ponty resigns from *Les Temps Modernes* and “breaks” with Sartre in 1953. Even though there was some reconciliation between the two authors in 1956, there seems to be no evidence that Merleau-Ponty read the manuscript of the *Critique* in its preparation stage, before its publication. It is therefore likely that Merleau-Ponty did not have a detailed knowledge of the *Critique* when he composed “Interrogation and Dialectic.” Furthermore, with respect to Merleau-Ponty’s “working note” of June 1960 that references the individual and history, Sartre had already written about the individual and history in “The Communists and Peace” and “A Reply to Claude Lefort” in 1952 and 1953 in *Les Temps modernes* as well as in his even earlier “Materialism and Revolution” (“Materialisme et revolution”) which was published in *Les Temps modernes* in 1946, an essay which Merleau-Ponty cites in his “Marxism and Philosophy” (“Marxisme et philosophie”) in the same year. Merleau-Ponty here in “Marxism and Philosophy” states the following. “The question has sometimes been raised, and with reason, as to how a materialism could be dialectical; how matter, taken in the strict sense of the word, could contain the principle of productivity and novelty which is called dialectic,” and he here makes a general reference to Sartre’s “Materialism and Revolution.” Merleau-Ponty continues to provide his own answer to the question, which differs from Sartre’s. “It is because in Marxism ‘matter’—and, indeed ‘consciousness’—is never considered separately. It is inserted in the system of human coexistence where it forms the basis of a common situation of contemporary and successive individuals, assuring the generality of their projects and making possible a line of development and a sense of history.” Merleau-Ponty’s stress here is on a “system of human coexistence where it forms the basis of a common situation of contemporary and successive individuals,” while Sartre’s stress is on individuals who must attempt to form social relationships. While Sartre talks about the necessity of seeing the individual in a situation, about forming social relationships to transform particular situations through work and action, he still does so (by his own admission, as we have witnessed above) from the point of view of his *Being and Nothingness* ontology, where his starting point is the in-itself and the for-itself, the for-itself and for-another . . . and the free individual subject. By contrast, Merleau-Ponty’s starting point is a system of human coexistence. With respect to the dialectic, Sartre published *Saint Genet, Actor and Martyr* in 1952, and states that “I delved deeper into the dialectic beginning with *Saint Genet* and I think that the *Critique* is a truly dialectical work” (Int 18). Thus Merleau-Ponty was certainly aware of Sartre’s ideas of the individual and history and could have well been aware of his dialectic before the publication of *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Thus the “working note” that Kwant mentions is not definitive with respect to
Merleau-Ponty’s awareness of the *Critique*. Yet, even if he was aware of the *Critique*, since the working note mentioned by Kwant was written in June of 1960, the same year as the publication of the *Critique*, this does not change the fact that “Interrogation and Dialectic” was composed a full year earlier.

In the absence of some sort of citation or other form of textual evidence, it is difficult to know if Merleau-Ponty was aware of Sartre’s *Critique* when he originally composed “Interrogation and Dialectic.” Given the time line regarding the publication of these texts, it is highly unlikely that Merleau-Ponty was aware of any of the details of Sartre’s *Critique*, although he certainly could have been aware of Sartre’s *Saint Genet*, published in 1952. Yet, this does not really matter, for his criticism of Sartre in *The Visible and the Invisible* is still relevant given what Sartre has said about the development of his philosophy. Merleau-Ponty is not criticizing Sartre’s embrace of dialectical thinking (which begins to appear in *Saint Genet*) or of intersubjective experience (which occurs to some extent in Sartre’s *Critique*). He is critical of Sartre’s attempt to embrace dialectical thinking and intersubjectivity given his dualistic ontology of the for-itself and the in-itself and his continued embrace of the more or less complete freedom of the individual subject. By his own admission, as we have seen, Sartre still adheres to this dualistic ontology in his late *Critique*. Thus, whether or not Merleau-Ponty was aware of the *Critique*, his criticisms remain valid, for they are aimed at a thought that tries to get a dialectic (and an interworld, i.e., intersubjectively shared experiences and goals) from a rigid dualism.

If we look at Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, especially Part Three “Being-For-Others”, especially Chapter One, section IV, “The Look,” and Chapter Three, section III, “‘Being-with’ (Mitein) and the ‘We’”, we see that Merleau-Ponty has provided an accurate account of Sartre’s *social* ontology. Sartre offers the following example to illustrate his position. A man arrives home earlier, and, as he approaches his apartment, he hears his lover talking to another man in the apartment. In a fit of passion, absorbed in his own flow of subjective feeling, he bends before the door to peer through the keyhole. Suddenly, the door of another apartment down the hall swings open, exposing the jealous lover to “the look” of a surprised neighbor. This illustration captures, Sartre thinks, his social ontology, for the jealous subject is first defined by his (or her) flow of immediate subjective experience, yet the free subject is inescapably exposed to the critical “look” of others. Given Sartre’s view of freedom (that nothing can define the subject from the “outside,” that nothing can define the subject other than the subject’s own choice), the subject is thrown into a Hellish situation, with each free subject pitted against the external interpretations of others. I must constantly assert my freedom to define myself in the face of those who would define me otherwise. Furthermore, this conflict with the other can never be resolved, for each is free to think for him or herself, and, as such, there is no genuine *mitein*, no being-with the other, no intersubjectively shared experiences, interpretations, or goals. Moreover, just as the other attempts to label and define me from the outside, my relationship to others is also labeled by “the look” of third parties.
It is clear that Sartre’s *Critique* attempts to address the lack of *mitsein*, of being-with others, of intersubjectively determined goals in his earlier work, for the *Critique* admits that a genuine sharing of goals is possible. However, when Sartre articulates his later position he still maintains the same ontology of his previous, earlier works. Isolated individuals, he says, can form genuinely shared goals when they are faced with a common threat (“the look” of a threatening third-party). However, again, Sartre’s view of the individual and the individual’s relationship to others remains the same. Individuals remain free subjects. The for-itself and the for-another, the for-itself and the in-itself remain Sartre’s fundamental categories. Yet, given these categories, given that they are exclusive of one another, it is difficult to see how Sartre can maintain that there is a genuine sharing of experience, a genuine intersubjectivity.\(^\text{132}\)

**Comments**

Could it be that Sartre is correct? Could it be that all we have are individuals, who are free, focused on their own interest? The fused group only comes about when there is an external threat, with “the look” of a third-person or party perspective. Perhaps this is true in “bourgeois societies,” in the West, with its extreme emphasis on the individual. Perhaps this is true of human nature, at least as manifested in Western societies, in and since the modern period.

Yet, we should not mistake *human nature* with how it is realized in one-time period or in one type of society. Merleau-Ponty himself stresses that we humans are a mix of nature and nurture, nature and culture. We do have natural propensities but these are taken up and articulated through specific cultures. Humans clearly have the capacity for individuation, but also for a strong sense of family and community. Sartre takes the manifestation of human nature in Western societies, with its extreme emphasis on individuality, and makes it his ontology. Merleau-Ponty insists that we should not forget our shared world, especially of childhood, from which we can individuate as adults, yet with this community sense remaining.

We have many counterexamples to the characterization of human nature as primarily individually oriented. The Japanese society (as well as many others) is far more community oriented than Western societies. Also, even in the West, the family frequently displays a strong coupling and even identity with other family members. In the military, soldiers, especially those who face battle together, frequently have a profound sense of brotherhood. Moreover, and more academically, a variety of studies confirm a stronger sense of community than individuality in societies around the world. In his “Individualism-Collectivism and Personality” Harry Triandis states the following: “The individualism-collectivism cultural syndrome (Triandis, 1996) appears to be the most significant cultural difference among cultures. Greenfield (2000) calls it the ‘deep structure’ of cultural differences. While there is a myriad of cultural differences, this one seems to be important both historically and cross-culturally. Almost 100 publications per year now use this dimension in discussing cultural differences (Suh, 1999).”\(^\text{133}\) Also, George Rupp makes the case (with
strong political implications) that many societies around the world have a stronger sense of family and community than they do of individuality.\textsuperscript{134}

Thus, it is clear that cross-cultural empirical studies reveal a human nature that is capable of both a highly developed sense of individuality and a powerful sense of community. As mentioned, Merleau-Ponty’s own use of psychological studies reveals a human nature that is at first communal. Early childhood is profoundly familial, with the child’s identity extending to and including others. With development and the right kind of loving, community support, the child may reach a healthy sense of adult individuality---yet one that remains embedded in social relations. Compared to Sartre’s philosophy, it is Merleau-Ponty’s social ontology that more accurately represents the human capacity for both individuality and community and for the sense of individuality that has its origins in and remains rooted in a sense of community. In fact, the acute sense of isolation and loneliness that is widely felt in Western societies indicates, even with all the stress on individual freedom, that many have a longing for a stronger sense of belongingness.\textsuperscript{135} Moreover, it is Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, rather than Sartre’s, that can more clearly account for the formation of social groups and the movement of history.

\textit{Adventures of the Dialectic Epilogue}\textsuperscript{136}

Merleau-Ponty’s primary goal in \textit{Adventures of the Dialectic} is to trace and evaluate the use and development of the dialectic by a number of 20\textsuperscript{th} Century authors. He addresses the dialectic in Weber, Lukacs, Lenin, Trotsky, and Sartre. The book’s final chapter expresses his own view of the dialectic, formed (in part) in interaction with authors just mentioned, as well as with his own more philosophical writings. Given the topic at hand, Merleau-Ponty’s relationship to Sartre’s philosophy, the emphasis here has been on the book’s chapter on Sartre. Yet, since the primary motive for Merleau-Ponty’s criticism of Sartre is to show that he has difficulty developing a political philosophy as well as a related philosophy of history, primarily because he cannot adequately connect the individual with the community, it makes sense to briefly consider the last chapter of \textit{Adventures of the Dialectic}, for it is here that he lays out his own political view, relative to Sartre (as well as the other authors just mentioned), as well as his view of the dialectic.

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy commits us to the following. Perception is active. It actively meets the world, takes it up, and interprets it (bodily, perceptually, not yet conceptually). Perception is thus a form of expression. Furthermore, we should interpret the creative act of painting as a prolongation this active perceptual expression. The act of perceptual expression thus opens another tradition: just as perception takes up what is already available and orients it in new ways, so also the act of painting takes up what is already present (the perceptual field, other paintings, artistic styles and techniques, etc.) and orients it in new ways. We may also say that it is the unity (granted, only provisional) of perceptual perspectives that helps us understand the unity of experience through time, i.e., human history. “It is through our body that we have the first experience of the impalpable body of history . . .”, Merleau-Ponty says.\textsuperscript{137} To further help
account for the sense of history, Merleau-Ponty calls up Marx. In Marx’s philosophy, he reports, “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.” Since we labor in the world via our bodies, since we thus labor in a public space, we enter into an arena in which we struggle for recognition and in which we must compete with others. The social relationships that guide our interactions with others (for example, the workplace relationship of owner to employee), and how individuals within these relationships seek to change them over time, we call human history.

Marx, then, gives us a specific view of history, a view of a moving society that 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). For Marx, then, human history is moving toward the resolution of conflict and ultimately toward the universal recognition of each person by all the others. In Humanism and Terror, Merleau-Ponty is sympathetic to Marx’s general view of history but even here (and more so later) is skeptical about its projected outcome, a proletarian revolution and the subsequent arrival of a truly just, truly universal society. Later, in Adventures of the Dialectic, Merleau-Ponty is more critical of the view of history of the mature Marx, which stressed the immanent movement of economic events, which, in Soviet party politics, was supposedly understood by party elites. Here in Adventures of the Dialectic he seeks to understand history, as did the young Marx, by stressing the relationship between aware individuals as these relationships are mediated by material conditions and social institutions, including, for Merleau-Ponty, the social institution of language. In fact, it is language that more thoroughly helps us understand intersubjectivity and history, that helps us understand the formation of societies and their movement through time.

Merleau-Ponty’s later works (dating from his post-war writings to his death in 1961) continue to develop the role that language plays in the attempt to understand human experience, intersubjectivity and history. His important inaugural lecture at the Collège de France is once more worth our attention. He explicitly addresses the important role of language here and states that it provides yet another means to overcome the dichotomous relationship between oneself and others. Language is a means for the speaking subjects to share meanings, for the expressed meanings of each to cross into the meanings experienced by all others. As we have seen above, for Merleau-Ponty it is the synthesis of bodily perceptions, as they open upon one sole world, that helps us understand the synthesis of artistic styles and periods, that ultimately helps us understand the continuity of human experiences through time, i.e., history. Since perception is a form of expression, we can see how this form of expression might be prolonged or sublimated in other, more abstract forms expression such as speech. Speech can also be a means of bringing together my own experiences, and bringing them together with the experiences lived through by others. Here in the inaugural
He takes this further, for we see that he appeals to language as an important means of not only bringing together the individual with other individuals but also the individual with social institutions. Merleau-Ponty thinks that language helps us further understand this public space where human experiences overlap each other. Language helps us further understand human intersubjectivity and even the movement of human history. We have seen that Merleau-Ponty even draws a parallel between linguistic expression and the movement of history. Just as the will to express and the available linguistic system cross back and forth into one another, so also the active labor power of individuals and the available social institutions cross back and forth into one another. And just as changes in the linguistic system come about because tensions are perceived by the individuals who use it, by those who live and express within it, so also changes in social institutions come about because tensions are experienced by the individuals who live and work within them. In order to account for the movement of a society through time, then, we must consider the tensions within this particular social, economic, political system and how they are resolved by the individuals who live them.

This attempt to understand history, i.e., to understand it as the relationship between people attempting to resolve tensions within the context of material conditions and social institutions, is what allows Merleau-Ponty to say the following in *Adventures of the 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).

Returning to the political left and the idea of class conflict as the driving engine of history, we must now understand that class consciousness cannot be understood simply as a subjective mental state or simply determined by an objective set of conditions, i.e., simply in terms of an objective relationship to the means of production. Class consciousness must be understood as “polarized [human] existence, [as] a possibility which appears in the proletariat’s situation at the juncture of things and his life” (AD 47, my bracket additions). *Adventures of the Dialectic*, then, certainly does not deny here that history has a sens (a meaning and direction), even though it denies the immanent development of a proletarian revolution. We observe here that a certain praxis, a certain means of organizing behavior and interacting with others, can and does polarize human existence. This particular polarization, with the specific problems that it contains, may well 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 and values may be suggested by an experience that is nevertheless made more precise by certain social, cultural, and linguistic expressions), and given a specific social system (capitalism, not feudalism), certain solutions and possibilities may well
be suggested, may well appear as more probable than others—something postmodernists tend to deny. Societies do have a meaning and a direction, a continuity over time, from the past, through the present, to the future, as well as a discontinuity, a break with what has previously been framed by and done within certain institutions. History, as we have seen, must be understood as the relationship between people mediated by things and social institutions, and social institutions must be understood as human relationships (to each other and to nature) that have become “set” or “habitualized” as established ways of acting and interacting with one another.

This, in then, is how we should account for history. Its inertia (its lack of change or its continued movement in one direction) is accounted for by the stability (or rigidity) of various social, political, and economic institutions, with its progressive movement (or, as Merleau-Ponty argues, its increased democratization) grasped by recognizing that the human beings, who must live in institutions that are not always satisfactory, must nevertheless assimilate them, but may also attempt to change them. This view of history “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). That is to say, we cannot evaluate social institutions from the outside, supposing some sort of objective criterion, but we can criticize them for their own shortcomings, for their contradictions, for their inadequacies, for the fact that they cannot resolve their own tensions given their current composition. We should understand societies, not objectively, but through a “cross-growth” of the various sectors of society, “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). Again, changes in societies occur not just as the result of the movement of things or economic conditions alone but as a cross growth of all the elements and sectors of the society as a holistic system. As individuals assimilate all the institutions of all the regions of a society, in order to operate and gain recognition within them, conflicts frequently arise, and it is through the resolution of these conflicts that history is formed. It is the resolution of these conflicts that Merleau-Ponty refers to as the rationality of history.

Mentioning Trotsky’s philosophy of history here, Merleau-Ponty agrees that there is “no guarantee against non-sense than this step-by-step confirmation of the present by that which succeeds it . . .” (AD 77). Neither Merleau-Ponty nor Trotsky holds that there is a rationality outside of history (again, as modernists claim) 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). History still has a sens, a meaning and a future direction; true, this future 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 realized. 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 (something that is denied by postmodernists).

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 have seen, to the contrary, that he embraces a more holistic dialectic (put forth in various ways by Weber, Lukacs, and Trotsky), which is in agreement with his own more philosophical studies. This dialectic insists on looking at the interaction of all of the aspects and all the regions of society. They must be seen as coming together and forming a gestalt whole, where each aspect influences and is influenced by all the others. The movement of history must therefore be understood as a cross-growth of all these regions. 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 and social institutions, including the institution of language. 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 world and a social milieu, with its symbolic and linguistic institutions, 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, of expressing and thinking, and is thus prone to 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, the creation of new economic, social, cultural, linguistic forms in order to be better understood and more thoroughly recognized. History, in fact, occurs as the relationship between people mediated by the inertia of things, of economic conditions, and of social institutions, including language, as these people attempt to negotiate more satisfying conditions. 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 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.

Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the problems of the materialist dialectic in *Adventures of the 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 a strictly 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 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. With no position outlawed, 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). He continues: “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 that Merleau-Ponty already 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 been 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 disproportionately rewarding a few, with both wealth and power. In fact, in his introduction to his late collection of essays entitled *Signs*, 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.¹³⁹