

BOOK REVIEW

Making Politics Thinkable

**Merleau - Ponty and The Foundation of
an Existential Politics**

Kerry H. Whiteside

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988

339 pages

reviewed by Brian Knutson and Keith Knutson

Kerry Whiteside takes up an arduous task in attempting to locate a “foundation” of political thought for these postmodern times of cynicism and negativism such as we experience in the late 20th century. The straight forward manner in which he declares his intent lies in the very title of his book. Presenting the notion of foundations in an age characterized by a progressive loss of faith in master narratives, an antirealism in ontology, and an antifoundationalism in epistemology, is indeed an audacious undertaking. The measure of his success, or not, comes in the contribution of his argument to the dialogue and debate which is itself “politics.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, born in 1908, became the best French exponent of phenomenology, according to A.J. Ayer. By the time he died in 1961, Maurice de Gardillac claimed he had been the unchallenged teacher of an entire generation of French philosophy students. In his enquiries before WWII, Merleau-Ponty had considered politics ‘unthinkable’ because he believed it treated singular human beings in a too-statistical manner. Whiteside examines the overcoming of such naivete and the “...appraisal of the conditions under which an existential theory can make sense of political life, serve as the ground for political choices, and orient political actions” (p 3).

Whiteside sees this foundational effort for Merleau-Ponty’s political ideas primarily being worked out from 1945-50 in the political journal *Les Temps Modernes*. We shall investigate these foundations, but we should first note that his disappointment with communist states in the 1950s led Merleau-Ponty to be increasingly critical of revolutionary politics. His efforts to establish a ‘new liberalism’ provided room for state intervention in a capitalist economy, and should really be seen as standing against the Anglo-Saxon tradition of pragmatism and empiricism. His renunciation of Marxism in writing has led some to see his political philosophy as irrelevant.

Whiteside argues that Merleau-Ponty worked at developing a thinkable politics, in reaction to what he saw as the weakness of democratic thought: that it is actually less a politics than a morality. And he presents three basic elements of Merleau-Ponty’s foundational political philosophy. First, a conception of consciousness to comprehend political phenomena which recognizes that people disagree, involves choices, and acknowledges that political systems exercise violence against individuals. Second, that his phenomenology was developed to understand the conditioned character of social meaning. Third, Merleau-Ponty’s activity as a political educator who deliberately drew others into debate, was intended to be part of his theory.

The impact and influence of French philosophy and thought on the American pragmatic mind and politics is difficult to gage. The ideals of the French Revolution are central themes alluded to in the contemporary neo-liberal faith of American capitalism and political democracy. But the significance of existentialist writings by such as Sartre, Camus, and Aron, or poststructuralist works of Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze (labels, by the way, which are not necessarily accepted by those to whom we attribute them) is more likely to be found echoing in the halls of academia than finding application in the political process or being appreciated by the general

public. Thus, Whiteside's presentation of Merleau-Ponty's existentialist theory of politics seems to come at an odd time from the perspective of the American political scene of the 1990s. It is, however, pertinent at this juncture of human experience. It offers a "correction" of sorts, to the excesses of existentialist subjectivism and the chaotic pretensions of poststructuralism and deconstruction. And in so doing, it addresses the greater question of political participation, which regardless of the current political regime anywhere, is the perennial endeavor of human existence.

Whiteside addresses Merleau-Ponty's investigation into what is required to make "politics thinkable." Politics is defined as "the processes by which community is created, authority constituted, values distributed, violence controlled, and collective choices made" (p S). Given such definition, the necessity of "adequate intellectual tools" for all who would participate becomes evident. Thus the claim, "political thinking presupposes a particular philosophical foundation." What is needed is: *to understand* the complexity and unpredictable nature of political life; *to evaluate* the alternatives such political life presents; and *to act* in such a manner that political life serves to advance humanistic values.

The demands of political thinking, therefore, can be seen to be of rather tall order. The conceptions of human action and consciousness, that is, of human existence, are immediately brought into question. How we conceive human "being" is fundamental to all political questions. The statement that all acts are political takes on renewed significance. Of course, the burden of such inquiry doesn't sit well with the pragmatic mind set of contemporary Americans. Indeed, we witness the emotional dismissal of things political and of common governance with surprising frequency in contemporary society. And this coming from many of those elected to conduct the political business and discourse of public interests in the name of representative democratic government. The implications of this trend in American political discourse seems to be a fundamental indication of the need for a studied review of Merleau-Ponty's critique of politics.

It is abundantly clear that in politics people disagree and thus choices are necessary. But it also must be recognized that there are varying degrees of domination and violence in various political systems. And this is true, he suggests, in any of three particular theories of human existence if they are taken as foundational. Merleau-Ponty rejects idealism, empiricism, and Sartrean existentialism as offering the basis for a workable politics. The means by which disagreements are best dealt with, choices made, and domination and violence controlled, lie neither in idealism nor empiricism, but in a reworking of existential politics. Hence, his phenomenological investigation of the nature of consciousness, objectivity, and the structures of intersubjectivity represents a modification of the notion of the knowing subject of existentialist inquiry.

Drawing heavily upon Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, which supplies the main tenets of phenomenology and the introduction to the prescientific foundations of the lifeworld, or "Lebenswelt," Merleau-Ponty delves into the structure and meaning of concepts, objectivity, and the nature of purpose. The insertion of our subjectivity in our environment, our situation, locates us as natural, embodied beings. The Lebenswelt is the world of human praxis and of intentional activity; it is our everyday knowledge and beliefs. Our being situated in this lifeworld leads to the recognition that knowledge is historically rooted and interest bound. The Kantian notion of locating such activity in an ahistorical, transcendental subject is necessarily rejected.

Knowledge being thus located in the situated subject and occurring in history leads the phenomenologist to conclude that it is human activity itself that creates the standards that regulate communal life. It is this realization which links problems in the theories of perception, value, history, and politics. There exists internal connections between science and life practice which cannot be ignored. To do so serves only to highlight the illusionary nature of modern science's claim to neutrality. The concern with exactness, calculability, prediction, and technical control cannot account for or assess itself in a world of neutral objects. The result is to be caught in the positivist's trap of defining even human perceptions and emotions as objects, as mere "things" whose motion can be explained as the function of certain conditions. There occurs a devaluation of perception as wildly threatening as any postmodern deconstruction might appear to the rational mind.

If human subjectivity chooses, selects, forms, and evaluates the objects of its attention, then we can say that consciousness is intentional and human reality is self-structured and self-created. Yet, individual expression takes place within the social context. The phenomenologist accepts and acts upon the Hegelian thesis that humans are creating themselves through culture and historical action. "History" demonstrates the existence of

cultural groups and social differentiation. Social roles are not seen as incidental variations of human rational action alone. The contradiction between the human subject choosing and the reality of external determinisms such as class, or division of labor, working against such choice, locates, if not initiates, the existential analysis of domination and violence. Indeed, these features are primary in the expression and sense of history.



Quenten Brown, Sophomore, "Untitled," Drypoint Print

violence. The empiricist reduction of mind to a natural phenomenon, in obscuring the distinction between act of subjective consciousness and external cause, buries legitimate inquiry into freedom and its opposites.

The Cartesian defense of reason against skeptical attacks was an attempt at formulation of "solid foundations." This seems oddly similar to Whiteside's own "foundational goals" with regards to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological existentialism. That note aside, for Descartes, mind is essentially reactive, registering external inputs. Subjective phenomena such as intentions and values are ignored as possible explanation. Perception is considered "just a confused idea." Illusions and hallucinations are dismissed as simply "failures of judgment." Fixed natural laws of cause and effect, arrived at through intellect, are established. They are, as it were, known.

On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty's project, while searching for foundational understanding, maintains that in perception something is given to the senses. It is lived rather than known. "Neither empiricist nor idealist theories account for the 'lived world' in which meaning arises; neither is foundational; and both become mired in insoluble paradoxes" (p. 51). It is in this systemic 'confusion,' which both empiricist and idealist theories nurture, that the questions of domination and violence remain hidden. Such questions, Merleau-Ponty maintains, are 'uncovered' and brought to light in an existentialist inquiry of political thought.

Whiteside's research furnishes an insightful outlining of the development of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical positions. He highlights the historical significance of that development within the context of the major themes of the 20th century: Bolshevism, Fascism, Liberalism, and the woven relations of war which tie them together. From the pre-WWII neo-Kantian, Brunschvicgean idealist educational background in which Merleau-Ponty chose his concentrations in psychology and perception; to the postwar existentialist philosophical dialogues of

Whiteside points to Merleau-Ponty's position that "history demands a way of thinking that finds a middle ground between the voluntary action of some and the passive obedience of others" (p. 41). It is in this sense that political action is embedded in history. This is the source of taking meaning and developing an understanding from history. The structures of human understanding arise in our communication with the surrounding environment and with other people.

Structures, "Gestalten," are patterns of interaction of living beings and their environment. It is the human ability to exercise subjective shifts in perspectives and use symbols which endows us with freedom. Freedom is a fundamental cultural and material measure of human "progress." When taken in its negative sense it is also the notion from which domination and violence arise. As Merleau-Ponty notes, man is a social being existing between a subjectivist theory of consciousness and an objectivist theory of structure. Here Merleau-Ponty takes "objectivity" to express the structural nature of perception. It is here that the issues of domination and violence take their significance. And it is here we see an important reason for his rejection of the empiricist conception of human existence.

Empiricism is inadequate as explanation of human existence, in Merleau-Ponty's view, because it obscures inquiry into freedom, and hence, into domination and

the 1940s; to the Saussurean linguistics investigations of structure in the 1950s; Whiteside presents Merleau-Ponty's life and pursuit of things political.

Whiteside argues that Merleau-Ponty's works from the 1940s offer the grounding and understanding that phenomenological existentialist philosophy has to contribute to thinking politics. The critique of Marxism, Communism, and the Soviet system in the post-war years, is flavored in the language of existentialist inquiry. He rejects the vulgar reductionist interpretations of the economic determinism found in so many claiming the tradition of Marx. The Stalinist model of Soviet society, with its excessive authoritarian and bureaucratic tendencies, is also brought into question. That system fails, in his interpretation, with the coming of the Korean War. And yet Merleau-Ponty's most important works concerning a philosophy of politics are, in Whiteside's estimation, produced in the 1940s, "if one wishes to appreciate the cognitive and ethical problems of thinking politically" (p. 278). It is in these writings that the inevitability of values in political thought are incorporated into his analysis through a combination of Marxism and Gestalttheorie. This combination and an objectivity grounded in subjectivity, that is, Husserlian intersubjectivity, provide the framework in which Whiteside sees the foundation of an existential politics taking form.

Merleau-Ponty's reading of Saussure and reformulation of his philosophy of history through the 1950s leads Whiteside to declare that he abandons his work on a foundational project of politics. It remains questionable, however, if Merleau-Ponty ever considered his work to be foundational. It is, indeed, Whiteside's hypothesis, not Merleau-Ponty's. The problem seems to lie in Merleau-Ponty acknowledging a multiplicity of perspectives in which "meanings do not converge to establish a truth that is superior to any one of them" (p. 252). Whiteside reads this as diminishing phenomenal objectivity by undermining the principle of thematic and functional wholeness. Merleau-Ponty is foreshadowing "post-structuralist" criticisms and opening the way for the contingency of meaning in a radical way. Historical phenomena and change become linked in only limited and temporary ways. There is no immanent universality.

The opening of this radicalization of history and meaning invites the recurring threat of the irrational. The challenge of skepticism and limitations of intellect are the fuel for the fires of faith. The power of explanation through reason is challenged by the recognition of the nature and meaning of a universe that is basically absurd. We stand at the edge and peer into chaos. Do we proceed with leaps of faith? Or retreat to the realization that all beliefs are man-made, that there really are no objective values? The can of worms has been opened and there can be no turning back of the clock. The best we can do is recognize our habitual doubt; inquiry must be a process of doubting. The truth of all knowledge must always be in question.

Hegel offered the insight that skeptical arguments serve to show how unintelligible each limited picture of the world is. The universe and our understanding of it is historically developing. There is a legitimate skepticism at each stage because understanding is an incomplete and contradictory process. Marx continued that realization in maintaining all views we hold are reflections of other developing factors. The contemporary "post-modern" realization of history being local, fragmented, and disconnected strikes a blow at totalizing and universal concepts. The tradition, while challenged, is not diminished in so doing. The necessity of revisiting and accepting the fact that history is a continuing process is indeed given renewed emphasis. The founding of meaning is thus not a static absolute, but a lived experience in which politics takes its purpose.

The shift of Merleau-Ponty's political sympathies following the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, signaled his giving way to a "new politics" in face of inexcusable violence and historical disorder. A political system needs to be evaluated "not according to the amount of violence it perpetrates at a given moment, but by the 'sens' (meaning and direction) of its violence, by its tendency to perpetuate or abolish itself through time, by its function in a society" (p. 222). Merleau-Ponty finds the solution lies in the virtues of parliamentary government and political freedom. It is in representative institutions that policies are explained and justified, claims scrutinized, and mistakes exposed and afforded means of correction.

Liberalism for Merleau-Ponty is viewed in terms of Kantian moralism rather than the Anglo-Saxon utilitarianism as we in the United States have come to understand the tradition. The rise of commercialism and the bourgeoisie in opposition to the landed nobility; the concepts of natural rights, laissez-faire, and inviolability of property rights; and the Hobbesian hedonic calculus of pain and pleasure are not the immediate themes of Merleau-Ponty's "new liberalism." His interest is that the "functioning of the political and economic system as a whole serves the public interest" (p. 248). He stresses the need to connect the foundations of meaning

to problems of political knowledge and decision. The purpose is to address the requirements of a humanistic politics.

The significance of an existential politics in a post-cold war world is to point to the means of moving beyond 'Bloc thinking,' which is the corrupted logic of cold war reasoning. The foundations of political praxis require the existential demand that one address the meaning one's action has in the eyes of others. The necessity of dialogue and rejection of brute force to settle differences requires the reexamination of the relationship of violence and freedom. In a society atomized by economic competition and liberal freedoms the dialectical nature of that relationship is often ignored. In contemporary American consumerism do we recognize that there is more to freedom than economic autonomy? Or that the primary forms of oppression are essentially economic? What role do unemployment and poverty play other than to serve as impediments to freedom and means of self-actualization?

Whiteside's project of locating the foundation for a political thinking rests upon Merleau-Ponty's concern for a humanistic consideration in politics. The research and analysis he carries out is justification enough for a strong recommendation of his work, regardless of any agreement or not with his conclusions. The book deserves the attention of any who find concern for maintaining political dialogue as the means of guaranteeing a minimum of opposition and truth.

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