



## **Thinking Corporeally, Socially, and Politically: Critical Phenomenology after Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu**

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**Abstract** For Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu, thinking is a social and political activity and must be understood as embodied, as taking place in a social context, and as having political effects. Following their work, this article shows how both phenomenology and the social sciences, in order to give a complete account of human reality, must recognize the distance reflection creates between thought and practical existence to reach the ontological, social, and political meaning of both kinds of experiences. Their explanations of the embodiment of society in individuals and of the materiality of thinking offer an alternative to ontological difference they criticize in Heidegger. This study of Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu serves to lay the bases for a critical phenomenology as an attitude that can be adopted in the context of either discipline, but also to defend the position that thinking is always a way to find ourselves in others and others in ourselves.

In the social — and always potentially political — action of thinking about society, we establish a distance between ourselves and society, ourselves and others, and ourselves and our self. We take on the existing movement of interrogation of the world, but in doing so we break with the evidences of daily life.

This distance results in the ever present danger of losing that which we wanted to think and to limit our life to the categories we use to think, which are but one of the dimensions of our lives. The problem does not consist in leaving and finding the proper manner to return to the cave. It consists in resisting fictions of this kind, be they new or as old as our traditions of thinking; in avoiding the re-creation of the kind of insurmountable dis-

tinctions that philosophy has attempted to overcome — including the distinction between ourself, our body, and our society. In order to account for our experiences and the setting in which they take place, and to act upon them, we must be able to think ourselves as embodied in society and in history, in the very manner we live within them: not without difficulty and uncertainty, and not without a practical sense of their possibilities and meanings.

Thinking is always embodied, as a result it is also social and, as such, it also has political consequences. This thesis implies that it is not sufficient to describe embodiment to account for thought, as the body is inscribed in society and in political processes, which affect thinking just as much as the corporeal character of existence. In order to defend this thesis, I will develop the beginnings of a critical phenomenology that is already present in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Pierre Bourdieu, specifically in the reflection they developed on thinking and on the relationship between two modes of thinking about social life: philosophy and the social sciences.

A first theme to be explored in the texts where Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty describe thinking as an activity that is embodied, as well as socially and politically situated, is their refusal of the ontological difference. This refusal can best be seen in their critiques of Sartre and Heidegger, which take aim at a tendency of philosophers to de-embodiment the activity of thinking. With Merleau-Ponty, we will finally see that the refusal of ontological difference can lead to an understanding of philosophy and the social sciences as sharing the same field, as emerging, like any form of thinking or practice, from the lives of those who live together — and as affecting these lives. The relationship of the social sciences and philosophy will also be a privileged theme insofar as it opens us to other methodologies that address the same problem of what it is to think about society, and that consequently come to question our own — methodologies that lead to questions and analyses we can take on as our own and that highlight the continuity between the disciplines.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Through these themes, and a focus on Merleau-Ponty's ideas after the *Phenomenology of Perception*, this study thus differs from other comparisons of Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu's work (Crossley 2001; Marcoulatos 2001). Melançon (2008) presents a more detailed study of the political consequences of Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu's position and of their connection to their political actions as intellectuals.

## Beyond Phenomenology's Traditional Reflexivity

In his desire to mark his distance from the philosophy of Husserl, which he had originally chosen as a dissertation topic,<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu rarely used the cultural capital he had developed from its study and focused instead on criticizing his competitors. His main targets were Sartre, who served as a representative of the phenomenological tradition; Schütz, whose phenomenological sociology was a direct rival to his own critical sociology; and Heidegger, whose dream of a pure philosophy negated the very basis of sociology. Although Bourdieu sometimes addresses this critique to Merleau-Ponty as well, he does not seem to have developed a genuine criticism of Merleau-Ponty, beyond associating him with Husserl and Sartre. Rather, the phenomenology at which Bourdieu takes aim is Husserlian phenomenology before developments influenced by *The Crisis of the European Sciences* and by the second and third (posthumously published) volumes of the *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. In other words, Bourdieu criticizes the phenomenology that has not taken the social and political turn given to it by thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Jan Patočka, and Merleau-Ponty himself.

Yet insofar as I intend to draw from both Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty, I must first and foremost address Bourdieu's critique of phenomenology as subjectivist, since it is presented as applying to phenomenology in general as well as to Merleau-Ponty. In *The Logic of Practice* (1992a), Bourdieu seeks to overcome both subjectivism and objectivism, which, represented respectively by Sartre's existential phenomenology and by structuralism, were central to the French philosophical space. He thus repeats, from the perspective of sociology, the same operation that was central to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002a), also partly based on a critique of Sartre.<sup>2</sup>

Bourdieu begins by rejecting the opposition between subjectivism and objectivism. He shows both as indispensable modes of knowledge, neither being sufficient to understand the social world. While each mode of thought has contributed important insights to the social sciences, none the least by its criticism of the other, both share the same presuppositions and, more importantly, the same opposition to the practical knowledge which makes up

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<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu himself refers to this period of his life in his *Sketch for a Self-Analysis*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> See specifically the lengthy "Introduction" on the critique of subjectivism and objectivism, and the concluding chapter, "Freedom," as a response to Sartre.

our experience of the social world. To understand this experience, Bourdieu urges us to reflexively return to our subjective experience and objectify the conditions of this experience.

Under the heading of subjectivism, Bourdieu groups phenomenologists such as Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Schütz, Blumer, as well as Berger and Luckmann.<sup>1</sup> Their approach, he suggests, is not radical enough. Phenomenology does not reflect on our familiarity with our environment as a whole, but only with our most familiar environment, which is *certain* insofar as it is how we live our experience of the social world. However, from an objective point of view, it is merely illusory. Phenomenology does nonetheless deepen our understanding of a world that might not be correctly or fully understood as we experience it. Yet because it supposes that it correctly understands this world, phenomenology bars its own access to the very knowledge it seeks to attain. Its fault is its failure to question “the conditions of possibility of our experience, namely the coincidence of the objective structures and the internalized structures which provides the illusion of immediate understanding, characteristic of practical experience of the familiar universe.” (Bourdieu 1992a, 26)

More importantly, this phenomenology excludes any consideration of its own social conditions of existence and practice. It does not consider the social signification of the *époque*, central to an attitude by which philosophers isolate themselves from social scientists by framing them as merely building constructions on the social scene itself — constructions philosophers are then free to ignore. Phenomenologists, and especially the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness*, do not recognize any durable dispositions or probabilities in the world and place the subject in a constant antagonism and opposition to the world. Focusing on consciousness, they forget *praxis*. Sartre is Bourdieu’s prime target because “he leaves no room, either on the side of the things of the world or on that of the agents, for anything that might seem to blur the sharp line his rigorous dualism seeks to maintain between the pure transparency of the subject and the mineral opacity of the thing.” (Bourdieu 1992a, 43) If for Bourdieu, phenomenology in general

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<sup>1</sup> It can be helpful here to point out that Bourdieu’s main critique of ethno-methodology is that, just like Sartre’s phenomenology, it studies a limited aspect of reality and elevates it to the level of social reality at large: its description of “the experiences of the social world that goes without saying [...] can be very interesting, on condition that one knows what one is doing and does not present this science of the lived experience of the social world as the science of the social world as such.” (Bourdieu 2008a, 69)

does not go far enough, we will see with Merleau-Ponty, who also criticizes Sartre's position that there are only human beings, beasts, and things (Merleau-Ponty 1973a, 145), just how phenomenology can scramble these limits once it positions itself at the juncture of human beings and things, in the midst of adversity. (1973a, 146)

Subjectivism, according to Bourdieu, universalizes the experiences of subjects of knowledge, and more specifically the experiences of intellectuals who attempt to become pure subjects and who can only from that position recognize and identify with other pure subjects. Objectivism functions in the opposite manner and thus presents a critique of subjectivism. It questions the conditions of a return to our experience of the social world. It reminds us that our immediate understanding of others comes from our contacts and agreements with others. The objectivisms of Saussurian linguistics and anthropological structuralism find an agreement of this kind on the meaning of signs and on the system of relationships between individual consciences, with meanings and systems being irreducible to their execution.

Bourdieu criticizes objectivism for forgetting how the world opens itself to us immediately (and so for ignoring the contribution of phenomenology), but also for sharing a flaw with subjectivism: it forgets to objectify *everything*, including the objectifying relationship — that is, it remains blind to the social and epistemological rupture we operate when we begin to study society. Both objectivism and subjectivism ignore the meaning of social life, which lies in being lived as a matter of course, as it is objectified in the institutions of a society. Both ignore the fact that they are breaking with the natural attitude. As a result, in his *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu calls for what amounts to an additional *epochè* which should follow those suggested by Husserl: if we are to suggest that we collectively construct the world, we must also study how we construct the principles of this construction of the world, based on our social and political situation in this world, and based on how the State educates us and structures us, down to the schemes that allow us to perceive all aspects of reality. (Bourdieu 2000, 174)

Indeed, subjectivist and objectivist observers break with their actions and with the world in order to account for them without simply reproducing them: observation, even if it takes place in the form of reflection, takes us away from our practical relationship to the world. Here Bourdieu names Merleau-Ponty explicitly as insufficiently practical: for him, as for all those who transform the work of thinking into a work of expression, “action is fully performed only when it is understood, interpreted, expressed.” (Bourdieu 1992a, 36) Action then loses the tacit and practical thinking that accompanies it and is reduced to expressing something, rather than simply

being meaningful, rather than simply making sense practically. This lesson of objectivism should serve to correct phenomenology's subjectivism.

### **Embodiment and Habitus**

For Bourdieu, only our knowledge of ourselves as subjects of knowledge can overcome the antinomy and the shortcomings of subjectivism and objectivism. We need a new understanding of the relationship between theory and practice. To achieve it, we must break with our indigenous experience of the world and stop importing our own practices as scientists and professional thinkers into the acts we observe. The danger in forgetting or refusing to objectify our own point of view, whence we produce our discourse on society, is that our whole discourse will be a description of this point of view and will only offer a limited and particular analysis of the social world.

Instead, reflection can become critical inasmuch as it frees us from its own conditions of production and makes it possible for us to locate ourselves in practical relationships to the world. Bourdieu describes the practical relationship as “the pre-occupied, active presence in the world through which the world imposes its presence, with its urgencies, its things to be done and said, things made to be said, which directly govern words and deeds without ever unfolding as a spectacle.” (Bourdieu 1992a, 52) A critical position that objectivises this relationship will be a physical, embodied position within society that is aware of its political limits and effects.

Bourdieu's notion of habitus attempts to go beyond the alternatives of freedom and determinism, of consciousness and the unconscious, or of individual and society, by linking both terms through the embodied practices that make sense as we perform them. The habitus, he suggests, “is an infinite capacity for generating products — thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions — whose limits are set by the historically and socially situation conditions of its production.” (Bourdieu 1992a, 55) It informs and governs perception, behaviour and practice, based on the behaviour and practice acquired through the contacts we have with others at home, at school and at work, as we move physically through society and participate in institutions. It is the knowledge of the body within the body, and knowledge of the world we inhabit from within that world, in which we participate without questioning it, without accomplishing complete distance or rupture from it. Bourdieu writes of the agent who is engaged in a practice that “He feels at home in the world because the world is also in him, in the form of habitus.” (2000, 143) Bourdieu even defines habitus as “the social made body,”

(1992b, 127) as the incorporation or embodiment of society and of its rules and norms, in such a way that “when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a ‘fish in water’: it does not feel the weight of the water, and it takes the world about itself for granted.” (1992b, 127) At the same time, as a habitus in a body responds to a social field of activity to exploit its possibilities and to push them further, as it is triggered in different manners and leads to different actions, and as it adjusts itself to different social fields, it also transforms these fields.

Bodies and languages, Bourdieu suggests, acts as deposits for thoughts. (1992a, 69-70; 72-73) Indeed, what is expected of us, given our place in society, is converted into automatisms which range from the way we eat to the way we look at others and speak to them — even in the most abstract fashion, in philosophy. There is a rationality of practices, different from that of scholarly thought, and which underlies it. These identificatory schemes are learned practically, as we go from practice to practice, through structural exercises that transmit strategies and ways to master practices, and do not require us to be conscious of them and to have them expressed to us: the actions of others are simply repeated into new actions, as the same aims and results are pursued: practical logic only understands in order to act, never to express or explain.

The notion of habitus is tied to the idea of a logic of practice — an inexact, unreflexive logic that nonetheless gives meaning to our words and actions. This logic of practice is based on the many meanings of words and actions, and so it “is able to organize all thoughts, perceptions and actions by means of a few generative principles which are closely interrelated and constitute a practically integrated whole, only because its whole economy, based on the principle of the economy of logic, presupposes a sacrifice of rigour for the sake of simplicity and generality and because it finds in ‘polythesis’ the conditions required for successful use of polysemy.” (1992a, 86)

We must thus recognize that it is also our body that thinks, and that our thoughts and feelings do not simply emerge from our quest for truth, but also from the situations in which we are placed and in their resemblances to earlier, similar situations. Once we learn how to think practically, be it for example politically or philosophically, it is enough to place the body in a similar situation (in party conventions, in classrooms or at conferences, or in front of a book or computer) to trigger the same habits, the same feelings, and the same thoughts. Thoughts, values, and identificatory schemes are embodied without our explicit, reflexive awareness. Our appreciation of the ideas of others takes place through our more global appreciation of them as

persons, of their body, of their behaviour, of their posture and manner of speaking — all in relation to the division of labour and of value between men and women and between positions in the social hierarchy of labour. (1992a, 72)

In other words, while philosophy is a practice, it and other scholarly disciplines differ from everyday activities by superimposing theoretical logic upon them. With Randall Collins, I can then suggest that philosophy is merely the intellectual *activity* that deals with the most abstract aspects of life. (1998, 754) Like any other practice, philosophy depends on how we have incorporated the past and the structures of the social world — and specifically the structures of the philosophical field — and on how we reactivate or enact them as we act. Philosophy has its own habitus, its own set of things to do and to be done in a specific manner; it depends on “action plans inscribed like a watermark in the situation, as objective potentialities, urgencies, which orient [our] practice without being constituted as norms or imperatives clearly defined by and for consciousness and will” (Bourdieu 2000, 143). We know how to talk and communicate abstract thoughts, and in a similar manner, philosophers know how and about what topics to philosophize, and the most read philosophers, without reflection, have a sense of what strategies to use in order to garner attention from their peers. (Collins 1998)

The challenge is then to philosophize purposefully and consciously, to understand at the same time the difference between the theoretical logic of philosophy, the practical logic of the activities philosophy attempts to understand that continues, and the practical logic that gives a meaning to the words of philosophers and to the actions that take place through their words, through their conferences and books, most of the time unreflexively. We cannot know what we are saying and doing and we cannot understand the philosophies of others without being aware of this practical logic.

Once we undertake the critical *epochè* of our situation that consists in becoming aware of our own habitus and social situation, we become aware of the point of view from which we observe ourselves and others. We can see the rupture from the world to which we have been accustomed by our philosophical habitus. There is a *doxa*, “a set of fundamental beliefs which does not even need to be asserted in the form of an explicit, self-conscious dogma.” (Bourdieu 2000, 15) Bourdieu calls this form of opinion proper to scholarly pursuits *epistemic doxa*. It consists in the wilful ignorance of what takes place in non-academic fields, and specifically in the political field, which is compounded by the ignorance of this ignorance. This double ignorance means that while even a political philosopher’s attention might be

focused on specific political phenomena to be studied, such as party ideology or voter turnout, they see them as entirely separate from, and unrelated to, the scholarly undertaking of studying them. More importantly, this undertaking itself is seen as taking place only in the scholarly (philosophical, sociological, political scientific) field, without being influenced by or influencing the political field. As a result, philosophers see themselves as *atopos*, without a place:

while it has to be pointed out that the philosopher, who likes to think of himself as *atopos*, placeless, unclassifiable, is, like everyone, comprehended in the space he seeks to comprehend, this is not done in order to debase him. On the contrary, it is to try to offer him the possibility of some freedom with respect to the constraints and limitations that are inscribed in the fact that he is situated, first, in a place in social space, and also in a place in one of its subspaces, the scholastic fields. (Bourdieu 2000, 29)

This philosophical doxa is practical, it is a feel for how philosophers move on the philosophical field, it is “a state of the body.” (1992a, 68) It is a mute experience of the world, felt, practiced, as the habitus and the field interact — it is a belief found in actions, existing only in action, as our body pulls us toward certain deeds, certain words, certain thoughts, without having to *think* about it. Bourdieu gives the example of improvised discourses in which the speaker transposes processes heard and used before, metaphors whose meaning is empty until they are used in a specific context, and adopts a posture and a rhythm that seem to impose themselves. We can also think about the stance professors take when they lecture, be it in class or at conferences, and about the effect this stance — or its absence — can have on the reception of their ideas, on their own ability to answer questions and to provide satisfaction to the audience that their questions or concerns have been heard and answered.

In unveiling this doxa, we also unveil the social and economic privileges that give us the possibility of undertaking scientific investigation and that separate us from the rest of society. We see that these investigations are designed to justify this privilege (for instance by allowing us to further social justice (or to believe we are doing so) without giving up anything of our position of privilege), at the same time as we unveil our tendency to oppose the knowledge we acquire to common sense and to undervalue practical sense, as if we did not also use it. Only when we see ourselves both subjectively and objectively and relocate ourselves within society and the structure of power and privilege can we hope to analyze society in a manner that will not simply benefit us as philosophers.

Given the mutual relationship between the world and the habitus, no identificatory scheme or thought pattern is too rigorous or too strong to resist a certain measure of change. We engage in practices, use words, and are led to think certain thoughts as contexts repeat themselves in specific situations which are similar but never quite the same. Through these practices, these words, and these thoughts, we contribute to the formation of social groups, we adopt a perspective on them, we maintain them in existence and we transform them, even if only slightly. (1992a, 85)

Bourdieu's intent is not to undermine philosophy, but to undertake a criticism of philosophy that offers it the possibility to become critical as well. (2000, 1-8) Philosophy can *become more reflexive* by undertaking the examination of its own conditions of existence and exercise, and even gain some independence from them as it overcomes the limits set by the philosophical habitus. The foremost manner in which philosophy can achieve this reflexivity is through confrontation with other disciplines. Mutual objectification allows the philosopher and the social scientist to finally see the rules of their game, to see themselves as subjects of knowledge within the social world, in geographic space and in history. The social sciences and philosophy, by brushing against the subjectivism or the objectivism of the other, can access a third, situated, embodied kind of knowledge. Re-inclusion within the social world and inclusion of other subjects (those who are not the traditionally privileged subjects of knowledge) are also necessary if we are to aim for universality — and will become possible by a study of what incites us to adopt the scholastic situation. Only in this manner can truth break away from its time and its milieu so that it may also become accessible and useful to those who do not share the philosophical or scholastic habitus — but also to us, if we hope to understand and perhaps affect our society without remaining limited by the current shape of our habitus.

### **Thinking as a Practical and Social Activity**

For Bourdieu, Heidegger offers the clearest example of an uncompromising philosophy that refuses these challenges. In *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* (1991), Bourdieu seeks a path between what is traditionally seen as social science and philosophy, or between objectivism and subjectivism, by undertaking the activity of reading philosophy. Correspondingly, he neither respects the philosopher's claim for the absolute autonomy of thought nor reduces the text to the general conditions of its production. Specifically, Bourdieu rejects the ontological difference that is central to Heidegger's

work. Indeed, Heidegger presents “*ontological difference* — the differentiation between being and beings” as allowing us to “first enter the field of philosophical research” and to “keep our own standing inside the field of philosophy.” (1982, 17)<sup>1</sup> In understanding philosophy against Heidegger as situated and as emerging out of its situation to become something new, Bourdieu presents a critical reading of Heidegger and of any philosophy that presents itself as pure and independent in any way from social structure.

In fact, for Bourdieu the very notion of ontological difference begins with the epistemic doxa: the separation of the philosopher from the world. The pretence of speaking from a position of pure, universal, disembodied thought creates a distinction between a relatively unthinking or unreflexive existence and a philosophical existence. This existence is a possibility that seems open only to humans in their quest for pure truth (and a quest that is said to be proper to philosophers) and that distinguishes them from any other being, any other part of Being. Correspondingly, Bourdieu reads Heidegger as suggesting that philosophers have the unique ability to experience Being in a fully human manner, and to access to a face of Being that is inaccessible to any other being — making Being the fate of their being. This distinction thus repeats the scholastic devaluing of embodied experience and of the logic of practice in favour of theoretical logic. (2000, 54-55)

Bourdieu consequently studies what allowed Heidegger to think — that is, the forms of censorship of the philosophical field as well as the ethical and political principles that determined his support for Nazism. Given the unavoidable relationship between biography and the internal logic of writing, and against the illusion of the omnipotence of thought, Bourdieu unveils a social unconscious that speaks even through what presents itself as pure thought. He presents the philosopher as the object of his habitus — as saying certain things unknowingly. And while all philosophy is made and meant to be interpreted and reinterpreted, Heidegger’s exploits this possibility for esoterism by devaluing exoterism and by speaking out against the denaturation of thought that occurs in its translation into common language. (Bourdieu 1991, 88-98) It is only through the assent of readers and interpreters that his thought can thus place itself out of the range of a final and fixed interpretation.

Bourdieu’s main thesis is that Heidegger’s political ontology is the philosophical expression of his social and political positions. (Bourdieu 1991, 65-69; 95-96) Both Heidegger’s political nihilism and his revolutionary conservatism are subordinated to the ontology he inherited from Aristotle

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<sup>1</sup> The notion is also developed explicitly in the conclusion, §22, p. 318-330.

and from Christian theologians, who understood the solitary quest of the thinker as entirely separate from the theories of political actors. But Bourdieu points out that there is for Heidegger an ontological frontier between politics and philosophy: philosophers can only find answers to social and political questions by translating them into their own language, less brutal and threatening than political language. (Bourdieu 1991, 73-76)

We can leave aside here Bourdieu's criticism of Heidegger's Nazism (Bourdieu 1991, 3-5; 104-105) in order to focus on his refusal of the ontological distinction. He begins with the double allegiance of philosophers: first to the social space, depending on the position they occupy therein, and second to the philosophical field. On both levels, they attempt to occupy a position of dominance. Philosophers' relations to the diverse positions of others within the social and political space are constituted through their relations to others in the philosophical field. (Bourdieu 1991, 55-59) Bourdieu finds Heidegger tied to the then-dominant neo-Kantianism, with regard to which everyone must define themselves; but instead of following this rite of passage of sorts, Heidegger attempted to reverse the existing philosophical order by creating a new dominant position. He gave legitimacy to his own heretic philosophical positions by using the prestige of his former master, Husserl, and by pushing his heresy as far as reconciling philosophy with the esoteric elitism proper to the mystic and anthroposophic groups of the day. Bourdieu thus argues that

There is no philosophical option — neither one that promotes intuition, for instance, nor, at the other extreme, one that favours judgment or concepts, nor yet one that gives precedence to the Transcendental Aesthetic over the Transcendental Analytic, or poetry over discursive language — which does not entail its concomitant academic and political options, and which does not owe to these secondary, more or less unconsciously assumed options, some of its deepest determinations (1991, 57).

Heidegger's philosophical revolution, given the context, was to reverse the neo-Kantian tendency to see philosophy as a reflection on science and to make it into the fundamental and foundational science, following his radicalization of the operation initiated by Husserl, which allowed Heidegger to develop an historicist ontology. He could then turn Kant against Husserl by undertaking the same revolution at a different level, reducing logic to aesthetics and concept to intuition. History then became the origin of knowledge through a Being understood as within time — and the only price Heidegger had to pay in exchange for this revolution was the necessity to adopt a radical historicism. (Bourdieu 1991, 60-65)

Indeed, Bourdieu suggests that Heidegger could not escape historicism at this point and that in his attempt to do so through verbal acrobatics, he could only fail. Heidegger would indeed affirm the essential historicity of being and inscribe both history and temporality in ahistorical and eternal Being. The fundamental existentials of Dasein thus become the ontological transcendental conditions of knowledge. Heidegger's radicalism comes from his ontologisation of the transcendental through that of history as Being is identified to time. Yet Bourdieu finds another important operation in Heidegger's *Being and Time*: "To identify ontological alienation as the foundation of all alienation, is, in a manner of speaking, to banalize and yet simultaneously dematerialize both economic alienation and any discussion of this alienation, by a radical but imaginary overcoming of any revolutionary overcoming" (1991, 68).

The distinction between authentic, ontological alienation as a loss of being on one hand and "merely" ontic alienation on the other makes the latter at most into a derivative of the former — or even completely detaches it from authentic alienation which it would mask the true alienation of all by forcing a focus on the inauthentic alienation of others (as would be the case with the focus on the proletariat in Marxism). But it is also a denial of the social order that makes Heidegger's operation possible, an operation whose very formulation is based on "ontic" social relations whose being are shown as secondary and, most importantly, as the source of the loss of the question of Being and of all authentic existence. With social and political existence being deemed "inauthentic," we have a *social and political operation* of retreat from that field into a dialogue with ourselves that is said to be pure, but that still has measurable *political effects*.

Furthermore, to go back to Bourdieu, what we have with Heidegger is the creation of a philosophical position that had been until then impossible to hold, between neo-Kantianism and Marxism — one that is the exact manner in which the conservative revolution situates itself with regard to liberals and socialists, and Heidegger's thought appears to Bourdieu as "a structural equivalent in the philosophical order of the conservative revolution, of which Nazism represents another example" (1991, 104).

What we ought to take from Bourdieu's critique of Heidegger is not the easily dismissed idea that thought is determined by social and political factors. Instead, we must understand his conclusion exactly in the sense he suggests: that while philosophy is its own activity, it *also* has its habitus and its situation. It is *an* activity among many, with its effects on the position of philosophers both within their field and in society and politics. And so it can find its correlative and its inspiration in other ways to think about the world,

namely in political thought and action, without there being any necessary connection between them. Finally, its operations on social and political existence, even if they aim to downplay or secondarize them, are still social and political actions, be they depoliticizing and anti-political.

Bourdieu thus shows that philosophy cannot think what it is doing unless it becomes an interrogation on its own embodiment in the social and political world and takes into account the political operations that unavoidably take place under the cover of “purely” philosophical thinking — an interrogation where the social sciences will play a central role. He thus traces a path for a phenomenology that is critical — that is, fully reflexive, to the point of asking the question of its conditions of existence — and political — that is, aware of its effects on these conditions as well as on social relations and political institutions.

In his book on Heidegger and in the *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu criticizes phenomenology for having neutralized its own critical and political character to the point of becoming the study of the established order of things. Because it does not go far enough and retreats from social life, phenomenology amounts to the justification of this social order — in spite of the possibility of an *epochè*, of a suspension of our social beliefs that would unveil how the social order appears to us.

Bourdieu offers us a description of the political character of the experience of thought and a manner to make phenomenology critical: “phenomenological analysis [...] has the virtue of recalling what is most particularly ignored or repressed, especially in universes in which people tend to think of themselves as free of conformisms and beliefs, namely the relation of often insurmountable *submission* which binds all social agents, whether they like it or not, to the social world of which they are, for better or worse, the products.” (Bourdieu 2000, 173) Phenomenology allows us to awaken from our own opinions and to finally take notice of all the variations of opinion across our society — to finally see the violence of the social order and the variety of opinions, beyond the primordial shared political belief: the imposed view of the dominants as universal point of view. The state itself, insofar as it institutes and teaches us the common symbolic forms of thinking and the social framework and practical schemes of perception and action, must then be studied critically.

Phenomenology must go beyond the conscience, toward bodies, but also toward social structures and the state, to uncover how we tacitly and practically submit to the state as long as it can produce our cognitive structures and tie them to objective structures in society. In other words, phenomenology can radicalize itself in order to combat symbolic violence

and to push democracy ever further by giving each and everyone the possibility of bringing into question our forced and tacit adhesion to an order that disadvantages us.

### **Approaching Others**

According to Bourdieu, phenomenology can become explicitly political if it is critical and aware of its political effects. And to do so it must go toward bodies, social structures and the state; it must also enter into a serious relationship with the social sciences. To flesh out the beginnings of a critical phenomenology, we can turn to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose treatment of the same problems and especially of the social character of thinking anticipated a great part of Bourdieu's criticisms and completes his analyses of the embodied character of thought and of social and political life. I will begin with Merleau-Ponty's refusal of ontological difference, which will once again throw us toward the communalities and conflicts of political life.

In "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man,"<sup>1</sup> a text adapted from a course at the Sorbonne meant to further Husserl's investigation of psychology toward the other social sciences, Merleau-Ponty undertakes a criticism of Husserl's successors. First, he argues against Scheler's phenomenological intuition of essences, which takes place without any intervention of our individual particularities, be they physical, physiological, psychological or historical. Scheler's phenomenological subject is de-embodied and located outside of society and history. Merleau-Ponty then criticizes Heidegger along the same lines for creating a paradox of being-in-the-world. Far from being situated in the world and thus limited as *Dasein* is said to be, Heidegger's philosopher is in no way restrained in his power of thought and finds himself in a position of anteriority with regard to science "by the primordial experience we have of it" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 94). Science would thus presuppose philosophical knowledge, which becomes its condition of possibility, and any knowledge of facts, any question about *Dasein*'s empiricity or onticity, must be preceded by a principle that would allow for their organization.

Through these criticisms, Merleau-Ponty refuses the radical opposition of the ontological and the ontic. Instead, he begins phenomenology anew

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<sup>1</sup> This text can be found in the collection of Merleau-Ponty's texts edited by James Edie, *The Primacy of Perception*, which is the edition we quote here, as well as in Maurice Natanson's *Phenomenology and the Social Sciences*.

with Husserl's characterization of philosophy as a search for essences within facts, and for eternity within time. With Husserl, Merleau-Ponty reminds us that there is a certain amount of non-consciousness in the consciousness of any thing, even of essences. Scheler and Heidegger, in comparison, are still opposing the human sciences to philosophy, establishing a relationship where one must prevail. They follow Husserl's attempt to present philosophy as the foundation for all sciences and they are thus maintaining the opposition between the ontic and the ontological. However, as is the case elsewhere for Husserl, phenomenology can also begin with the suspension of our belief in the world *from within this very world*.<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty sees in Scheler and Heidegger's opposition of philosophy and the social sciences the refusal of the idea that "essence is accessible only in and through the individual situation in which it appears." (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 95)

This formulation is, of course, that of existentialism. And just how important social and political existence is to existentialism is expressed in another of Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of Heidegger, in the conclusion to *Humanism and Terror*. It is worth noting that the very last passage of this book opens with Merleau-Ponty addressing the question of "the harmony with ourselves and others" (Merleau-Ponty 2001a, 187)<sup>2</sup> and signalling another refusal, that of "the pretense of a reason content with being right for itself and removed from the judgment of the other person." (187) This *agreement* and harmony is what Merleau-Ponty calls truth and it must be found both in "solitary thought" and — always — "through the experience of concrete situations and in a dialogue with other living beings" (Merleau-Ponty 2001a, 187; 1980, 308, my translation). Without this dialogue with others, universality and rationality are impossible. The conflict of opinions is then a starting point for dialogue which can only take place with others.

To describe this unavoidable inherence of thought to existence, Merleau-Ponty adds that "We cannot be 'existentialist' as we please and

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<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty often opposes Husserl's published manuscripts, from which he tends to distance himself, to the Husserl of the unpublished manuscripts on which he relied to write *Phenomenology of Perception* and on which he would increasingly rely as he attempted to address the shortcomings of his own philosophy, such as *The Crisis of European Sciences* (Husserl 1970) and volumes 2 and 3 of his *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*.

<sup>2</sup> In French, Merleau-Ponty writes: "l'accord de soi avec soi et avec autrui" (Merleau-Ponty, 1980, p. 307-308). We can note here the double connotation of "accord", which can be translated in political terms as agreement, but also as agreement in musical terms, that is, as consonance or even, quite literally, as a chord — bringing us again closer to the idea of harmony.

there is as much ‘existentialism,’ — in the sense of paradox, division, anguish and resolution, — in the *Stenographic Account of the Debates of Moscow*, as in all the works of Heidegger” (2001a, 187; 1980, 308, my translation). Indeed, Bukharin’s trial in Moscow shows him thinking in context and displays the fragility of the meaning political actors give to their actions and to those of others, given the impossibility of understanding another person’s opinions and actions outside of the context in which they take place. Heidegger’s philosophy is for Merleau-Ponty a “bad existentialism” because its description of our conflict with others and of the conflict of our thought with the world is incomplete. Indeed, Heidegger misses the moment when, faced with someone else’s opinion, we become aware of the contingency of our own opinions and aware of the presence of irrationality within us. What is more, this moment is only a beginning and not an endpoint, for it is our opening to this other person. We can only judge ourselves through the mediation of the other and indeed we *need* this mediation and the possibility to justify ourselves to others before we can have any kind of certainty for ourselves. If we are to maintain hope in the face of the established disorder, we must be attentive to events and to actions, and above all we must “maintain and multiply” our relationships to others.

It is yet again in reaction to Heidegger that Merleau-Ponty asserts the most firmly the situation of thought — of philosophy, of phenomenology — within the domains of society and politics. Merleau-Ponty affirms that we cannot dispute that Heidegger was a Nazi and that we cannot defend him on the basis of on any kind of right to err.<sup>1</sup> Rather, because it was the same man who philosophized and who chose in politics — as is always the case — it is necessary to find out what in Heidegger’s thought could “motivate the acceptance of Nazism.” (1946, 713) Merleau-Ponty thinks that this effort would contribute to wash out Nazism from existentialism, the essential part of Heidegger’s philosophy, and “it will perhaps show that an ‘existential’ politics is at the antipodes of Nazism.” (1946, 713, my translation)

If Merleau-Ponty is concerned with Heidegger’s Nazism, it is because he elaborated his own philosophy partly in relation to Heidegger, both in

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<sup>1</sup> In the fourth issue of *Les Temps Modernes* (January 1946), Merleau-Ponty, acting as the journal’s political editor (and, given Sartre’s overall engagement in the *Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire*, its sole editor for this period), published the introduction to a debate on the problem of Heidegger’s Nazism. While he never wrote a complete article on the topic as such, he did introduce the debate in such a way as to allow us to approach what he thought was the real problem.

harmony and in discordance with him.<sup>1</sup> When Merleau-Ponty suggests that we should situate Heidegger's existential phenomenology politically and relate it, even in its seemingly most apolitical aspects, to his political positions, he hopes to see where Heidegger might have been unfaithful to the philosophy he helped develop, and how some of his insights can be retained without remaining attached to his political commitment. Through the interrogation as to whether we can take on the ideas of other philosophers without taking their political choices, the question at hand is that of the universality of reason. The philosophy which could lead to an "existential" politics, and which Merleau-Ponty put between quotation marks, he called elsewhere "this philosophy" (2001a, 187; 1980, 308) and "the philosophy of existence." (1992a, 129-139)<sup>2</sup> It is indeed his own phenomenology he is discussing, and it begins with the desire to overcome the ontological difference and, indeed, any dualism.

### **The Shared Field of Philosophy and Social Science**

Merleau-Ponty's refusal of the ontological difference and the corresponding statement of the socially situated character of philosophy can also be found in his reflection on the relationship of philosophy and the social sciences — which is always also the relationship of philosophy with the social world. While Merleau-Ponty described at length this relationship in his course

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<sup>1</sup> This pattern of approaching Heidegger from an unequivocally social and political standpoint is found again in Merleau-Ponty's course notes from 1958-1959, "Philosophy Today". In the introduction to this course where Husserl and Heidegger are the main topics, we find a diagnosis of the contemporary crisis of rationality that both echoes Husserl's own diagnosis in the *Krisis* and updates it to give it its full political implications. Here we are struck by the resemblance to Arendt's own introduction to her 1958 book, *The Human Condition*, where she also seems to be updating Husserl's (or perhaps also in her case, Walter Benjamin's) diagnosis of the crisis.

<sup>2</sup> In *Humanism and Terror*, Merleau-Ponty writes "cette philosophie" while the translation reads "existentialist philosophy". For Merleau-Ponty, we should add, phenomenology *is* philosophy — not in the sense that all philosophy is necessarily phenomenological, but that Merleau-Ponty's attempt to develop phenomenology in such a manner as to allow it to be more rigorous is, for him, the whole work of philosophy, which must become always more phenomenological — no matter what we call it. We can then take "philosophy" and "phenomenology" to be synonymous in his work, when he speaks of his own thought and attempts.

“Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man,” its main orientations can be found in his article from 1951, “The Philosopher and Sociology.” Together with his refusal of an absolute distinction between the ontic and the ontological, Merleau-Ponty affirms his refusal of a pure philosophy and of a pure sociology.<sup>1</sup> There is a solidarity between all forms of thought and they are only possible because of their intertwining: all sciences secrete an ontology and all ontologies anticipate knowledge. What is more, positing a pure philosophy and a pure social science would be reverting to the alternative between intellectualism and empiricism — adversaries which Merleau-Ponty ceaselessly tried to show were accomplices and which only *seem* to force us to choose a side.

We must remember today that the sociological context in which Merleau-Ponty was writing was one where sociology tended to present itself as purely empirical, as positivist — a position that two sociologists whom Merleau-Ponty read attentively, Raymond Aron and Claude Lévi-Strauss, opposed. We can read “The Philosopher and Sociology” as a double refusal: on one hand the refusal of structural functionalism, and on the other hand, that of both logical positivism as found in some analytical philosophy and of logicism as a possibility abandoned by Husserl after limited attempts to create a pure language. Through these two positions, Merleau-Ponty refuses complete immersion, without distance, in the social world, and complete withdrawal from this world, as exemplified by Husserl’s early logicism and Heidegger’s thinking as a whole. However, it is Merleau-Ponty’s suggestions for our understanding of phenomenology and of the social sciences that interests me here.

The essential part of the work of social scientists, according to Merleau-Ponty, is the idealization of facts and the deciphering of meanings, and their method is the construction of intellectual models that allow them to

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<sup>1</sup> Here, as in “From Mauss to Claude Lévi-Strauss,” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b), many sociologists could find cause to criticize Merleau-Ponty for assimilating sociology to ethnology. Instead, and in order to do more than to simply point out that perhaps no such clear distinctions between “pure” disciplines could ever be made, this reflection should be seen as dealing with the social sciences in general through the particular case of ethnology. This branch of the social sciences (or the sciences of man as Merleau-Ponty calls them) does have the particularities of being relatively new in the post-war context; of aiming at understanding others beyond what appears to be the greatest possible divide; of allowing for a criticism of an approach to the diversity of cultures that establishes a strict hierarchy between them — evolutionism; and, in the case of Merleau-Ponty, it is also noteworthy that it was practiced by his close friend, Claude Lévi-Strauss.

adopt an attitude that is not that of strangers to these social facts. Indeed, we cannot separate ourselves from our experience of intersubjectivity and we cannot study society outside of the presence and meaning of social relations in our lives. Any operation on social relations, be it their abstraction, is only possible “by analogy or contrast with those we have already lived,” that is, by an *imaginary variation* that makes possible both a new meaning and any sociological meaning. (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 100) We can find a sociological meaning to facts only because we are in the institution that gives them meaning, because we grasp its personal and interpersonal structure, because we share with others the institutional relations to nature... and to others that make any correlation between facts possible. In other words, the social sciences function just like philosophy: they operate a coherent deformation of social life by de-centering and re-centering our experience of human plurality. It is our experience as embodied social subjects, which is an experience of ourselves and of others in their behaviour — in their acts and words — that makes social research and knowledge possible.

As soon as social scientists try to understand facts by interpreting them, they become philosophers, Merleau-Ponty asserts — and then of course, professional philosophers remain qualified to reinterpret these facts, even if they didn’t observe them, since facts always tell us more than any one person can interpret. What is more, philosophy needs to maintain a relationship with science. Philosophers always think *about something*, some part of their world and experience, which science reveals. As a consequence, they cannot forget what science says or the manner in which it rearranges these experiences. Science is, after all, “a set of means of perceiving, imagining, and, in short, living which are oriented toward the same truth for which our first experiences establish in us the demand.” (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 102; 1960, 165, my translation)

Correspondingly, the social is both something to know and a meaning that appears in every society. Phenomenology, as the consciousness of our rootedness in actual things, must recognize the lived world and, from this recognition, recuperate and formulate something that is merely scattered in our life and tied to its structures in order to give it an ideal existence — to abstract something that phenomena already present as abstractable. This return to actuality, to the speaking and acting embodied subject, is to be undertaken by both philosophy and social science. The intersubjective, embodied subjectivity is their shared field.

The same goes for our contact with other cultures, where communication effectively takes place. By recognizing this rare experience, philosophers see themselves stuck in the social fabric, in the fabric of their

own culture, while social scientists are forced to see the impossibility of making their objectification of the social from their own social point of view into an ontology. Merleau-Ponty thus reaches the same conclusion as Bourdieu: if we pay attention to the experience of thinking about others, we can find the limits of our own perspective. Husserl's formula "transcendental subjectivity is intersubjectivity" shows the ultimate blurring of the frontiers between the transcendental and the empirical — or the ontological and the ontic. All we see of others is their facticity, which is reintegrated to their subjectivity and becomes an integral part of their definition. As Merleau-Ponty said in his "Note on Machiavelli," what others perceive of us is as true as the way in which we see ourselves, and is just as much a part of who we are. (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 211-223)

Hence social knowledge is the knowledge of ourselves, the knowledge of intersubjectivity as ours — be it the knowledge produced by philosophy or the social sciences. It is from our inherence to our time and to our historical existence and from the inherence of our thought to whatever it thinks about that truth is possible. Our situation is our access to any meaningful action and knowledge and our contact with the social is the origin of all truth: we are always already in truth and we must define it starting from our own situation, since *it* is what we are trying to grasp, since it is *all* we are trying to grasp, in such a way as to open ourselves to others and, through them, to ourselves. Merleau-Ponty thus resumes the intertwining of sociology and philosophy:

"Science" and "sociology" will designate the effort to construct ideal variables which objectify and schematize the functioning of this effective communication. We shall call "philosophy" the consciousness we must maintain — as our consciousness of the ultimate reality whose functioning our theoretical constructions retrace but could not possibly replace — of the open and successive community of *alter egos* living, speaking, and thinking in one another's presence and in relation to nature as we sense its presence behind, around, and before us at the limits of our historical field" (1964b, 110).

As Merleau-Ponty indicates about philosophy and psychology,<sup>1</sup> the same results can be obtained from one discipline or from the other. Both philosophy and the social sciences develop "regional ontologies" and in the

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<sup>1</sup> He does so in the second part of the full Sorbonne course "Les sciences de l'homme et la phénoménologie," which were not included in the original publication of the course in the *Bulletin du Centre de documentation universitaire* and thus not translated, but were recently re-edited in *Parcours deux* (Merleau-Ponty 2001b, 423-464).

variety of such ontologies, they also show that any unity is to be found in the relation between the physical, economical, cultural, social or other dialectics within individuals. (2001b, 450) The only way to approach being, for Merleau-Ponty, is diagonally and indirectly through its particular instances, and vertically through a phenomenology of the depths that seeks to deepen our own embodied experiences. (Merleau-Ponty 2002b) These different domains of our lives that are thus instituted each call for a specific social science, and the points where they converge calls for philosophy. Social philosophy is then not the whole of these domains, but rather deals with the field the social sciences share with philosophy. As is the case in any truly dialectic movement, this dispersion and this convergence affect each other endlessly, without priority or primacy, and the relation between social science and philosophy will likewise be simply that of different domains of our lives.

### **Intercorporeity and Intersubjectivity**

The embodied, material character of thought and of our relations to others — the social knowledge I mentioned — is one of the features Merleau-Ponty developed anew in his later writings. As he had done in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes the body as the field of our possibilities, as being found among things, but also as the origin of our distance from things, and as participating in creating this distance. Our body, like the things with which it interacts, is in the same intentional fabric, which Merleau-Ponty names the flesh of the world. (1968) Given that we explore the world through an intentionality that begins with the hold the things of the world offer us, insofar as they are both open and closed to us, subjectivity is not an “I think” but rather an “I can.” In the same manner, the bodies of others open themselves to us as soon as we look at them, touch them, or talk to them. When we perceive someone else, we know their body is not simply a thing, because we perceive immediately another sensibility tied to another *thought* which is not available to us, but which is nonetheless there for us because they look at and act upon the same objects as us, in a similar manner to us. Merleau-Ponty borrows the German word *Einfühlung* from Husserl to describe this co-presence of the other as, at once, body and spirit, behaviour and thought: the *Einfühlung* is both an intentional encroachment (*empiètement*) of bodies and their intertwining in the flesh of the world. It is a unity of sensation — unity of body and thought, unity with the other.

(1964b, 169-170) We share the same anonymous, general life, through which we are open to the world and to others.

The other human being thus exists for us as a presence to the world, that is: as an animal of perceptions and movements whence thought comes as a modulation of that presence, as a co-perception of the same world. Others are present behind or underneath their thought. They are present in the thought we perceive behind their behaviour and that we find rooted in the presence of their bodies.

Merleau-Ponty thus interrogates what springs up (*surgit*) from the world by being generated, constructed by human beings, creating a layer of historical and spiritual being and a human world which is an elaboration on the natural world. Thought and ideality must be understood as belonging to this relationship to reality: they are not distinct from material and natural reality; rather, they are its reverse side. One of Merleau-Ponty's earliest attempts at defining a new ontology, in *The Prose of the World* (1973b), focused on the problem of language and stressed that thought and speech are one form of behaviour, being simply two occurrences of language. Thought and vision are given together as one apprehension of the world, (1964c, 15-16) just as thought and speech are given together: the foundation of thought can be found in our possibility to be made to think certain things by those who speak to us, and even for us to be made and unmade through conversations that affect our very manner of perceiving and relating to the world and others. New thoughts are always possible, and it is impossible to distinguish among our thoughts and ideas which are our own and which are those of others, what of others is in us and what of us is in others. Thought is entirely in language and in its uncertainties: speech always says more than what is said and takes us toward what we understand and toward those who are speaking. (1973b, 17-19) As Merleau-Ponty writes, "one speaks to oneself and one thinks in others." (1998, 67; 2002b, 55, my translation)

Insofar as the language we speak carries ideality and as others speak within us, it is speech that speaks. Here Merleau-Ponty takes on a theme central in the later work of Heidegger, all the while inflecting its meaning through a reference to embodiment and society. Ideality, that is, thoughts and ideas, springs up from the languages we use in our relationship to the lived world, through material (even if silent) speech. Ideality is at the same time a production of actions and meanings that reactivates the world and that goes beyond that world, as well as a reactivation of past productions (our own and those of others) through new productions. The ideal being of thoughts and ideas is founded on reiteration and on coherent deformations. It is thus Being itself that speaks in us, as we speak to each other based on what is already

common and intersubjective, as we go beyond the individual event of meaning as an event in our life, toward a broader horizon of meaning, of actions and of possibilities. (2002b, 43-44) Through the simultaneity of our presence and those of others to the world and to each other, and through the passage of a thought into another (in us, in others), we find again an *Einfühlung*, a unity of sensation, as well as our *Ineinander*, the one-in-the-other: through both faces of intersubjectivity and intercorporeity, thought and language, thought and corporeality, myself and others are intertwined.

Ideality is thus the articulation of our relationship to others and forms “the axes of this historical community, of this chiasm — the depth, the gap in relation to the same Being.” (1998, 57; 2002b, p. 86, note 122, my translation) This historical community is that of humanity, as past ideality is reiterated and engenders further ideality. This community is also society, and it bears a political meaning. The inter-humanity taking place in *Einfühlung* and *Ineinander* is a separation that binds and a general idea of social being. (1968, 174-175) Social being is not the nation, the people, or even the society; it is the institution, the solidification of our actions in their contact with those of others with whom we share a common inscription in geography and in history — in Being. (1968, 83-85) Society does not have its own intentionality, it is nothing but a fabric of intentionalities that encroach on each other and intertwine with each other, an intercorporeity and an intersubjectivity. This fabric of bodies, actions and thoughts opens a conflictual space and, from there on, the possibility of politics as the attempt to transform these social relations or to maintain them as they are — the reinstatement of what has already been instituted, notably of the state and its law. (1964b, 212; see also 2010) Each person must thus act, and “attempt following his own responsibility.” (2010, 16, my translation)

### **The Corporeality of Thinking and Critical Phenomenology**

Merleau-Ponty was among those who gave phenomenology a second breath and transformed it, allowing it to evolve as an attitude toward the world, without a necessary explicit reference to Husserl. More importantly for any project of thinking society and politics, Merleau-Ponty established a relationship of philosophy to the social sciences where neither supersedes the other, where each ultimately depends on the other. On the other side of this inter-disciplinary relationship, Pierre Bourdieu renewed the manner in which we understand critique: like the philosophy of some of the followers (such as Merleau-Ponty) of the Husserlian phenomenology he first studied, his

sociology places the sociologist and the philosopher in the world, among others. They can then cover the distance thinking creates, if only to a limited extent, by exploring it: the objectifier must be objectified. From this point of view subject and object, and thought and world, far from being identical, nonetheless appear as linked and as reversible sides of the same reality. Bourdieu did not limit this understanding of critical thought to sociology. He challenged philosophers to turn back toward themselves, not as pure consciences but as human beings in society, and to explore the habits and social factors at play in the exercise of thinking.

We never think alone, whether or not we are thinking about society and politics. Philosophy and the social sciences are neither solitary nor individual pursuits and rely, like all our activities, on what we share with others. In any dialogue, others think in us, in the echoes they create and through the manner in which our relationships influence the constant process of individualization and socialization — of institution — of our person. Others remain ever present in us, through the practical logic and institutions that guide our activities and gives meaning to our theorizing. At the same time, we also think through others, by going back to their texts, to our memory, re-enactment, and reactivation of their words and ideas, or simply, as in daily life, by taking them into consideration and extending our perspective to theirs. This continuous intertwining with others colours the manner in which we interact with others, treat them, understand them, and classify them, always in relation to unreflexive norms and the written laws of the state.

While we can hardly say that any of our thoughts are solely ours, it remains that *I* think my thoughts, as part of the series of experiences that are properly *mine*. Yet embodied experiences, while they are deeply personal and difficult to share, are not simply separate, individual experiences: as both authors show, it is our whole body and even our intercorporeity that thinks. The new notion Merleau-Ponty offered of a tangibility of ideality through speech and writing — of a flesh of the world and a flesh of the word — reminds us of the corporeal attachment and of the practical character of the activity of thinking, one Bourdieu theorized through the concept of habitus.

The distance, the gap we create when we think about ourselves and our society thus has social and political implications, depends on social and political factors, and is never absolute. Even as we create it, our thoughts remain embodied, intertwined with our habitus and the imprints others have left within us. There is a limit to how much distance we can take from ourselves, but also from others. Being aware of this limit allows us to push this distance further and to understand this limit and this distance. We are

thus better placed to understand that about which we are thinking, in great part because we can also grasp what we are doing when we think. But we also become aware of the presuppositions, prejudices, classificatory schemes, ideologies, norms, and laws that limit us in achieving knowledge, truth, and success in our actions — including the professional doxa that leads us to forget the specificity of thinking philosophically and its difference from the activities for which we are attempting to account, and the effects our own gender, ethnicity, culture, ability, or class have on our accounts.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, in speaking of intercorporeality we must not forget the image Merleau-Ponty gives us of reversibility: although I can *almost* feel my hands touching each other, one is always touching and the other touched and at the moment when they come closest to both being at once touching and touched, the perspective is reversed in a flash, the touched hand becomes the only one I can feel touching the other. It follows that as close as I might be to feeling what someone else feels or thinking what she thinks, as close as I and you who are reading this text might become, the gap between us subsists because of our corporeal, social, and political differences, even though our intercorporeality allows us to understand and affect each other intimately.<sup>2</sup>

Thinking about thinking corporeally, socially, and politically, by taking into account the fact that we never leave the world about which we think and speak, even as we reflexively alter the way in which we relate to it, allows us to gain a measure of freedom from what makes thinking such a difficult and limited attempt in the first place.

We can find in Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty's thought the beginning of a critical phenomenology. In such an attitude, social facts appear "as a variation of a single life of which our own is also a part, and that any *other* is for us "*another ourselves, another way to be ourselves.*" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 112; 1960, 182-183, my translation) It is a return within ourselves, toward intersubjectivity and intercorporeity, toward history in its entirety, toward the social that is our situation and creates our responsibility toward others; it is "universal praxis," as Merleau-Ponty writes. Critical phenomenology, beyond the necessary task for thinkers of questioning prejudices and

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<sup>1</sup> The importance of such fundamental differences to embodiment is addressed by Gail Weiss (1999; 2008) through an elaboration of Merleau-Ponty's thought and an answer to the criticism that he takes on the European male bias as the norm for bodily experience.

<sup>2</sup> This particular point is developed at length by Greg Johnson (2008), in relation to Merleau-Ponty's statement that "I can count on what I see, which is in close correspondence with what the other sees... and yet at the same time *I never rejoin the other's lived experience.*" (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 10)

presuppositions, is the reflection on our own situation and those of the people who surround us by the constant confrontation of what unites and separates us, from our body to our most abstract thoughts — the radical attempt to understand our lives through those of others.

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