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Without a Voice of One's Own: *Aphonia* as an Obstacle to Political Freedom

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Abstract

In this article I use Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology as a method for presenting a disclosing critique of *aphonia* as the loss of a political voice of one's own. I claim that *aphonia* is a phenomenon that is qualitatively different from a lack of opportunities for democratic participation and a lack of the communicative capabilities required for effective political participation. I give examples from sociological literature on social exclusion and political apathy, and then diagnose them using Merleau-Ponty's concepts of operative intentionality and the lived body. A picture emerges of *aphonia* as the diminishing of the expressive modality of the lived body. This can lead to the inability to perceive oneself as a capable public speaker and the public realm as a welcoming field of possibilities for political engagement. I propose that democratic theory should consider the way that the negative social experiences of social marginalization can diminish, or even completely take away, the capability to authentically give a voice to one's experiences in public on one's own terms. I conclude with a call for grass-roots alternatives towards engendering political participation among marginalized groups through a "therapeutic" approach to political inclusion.

Introduction

What does it mean to have a public "voice of one's own", either as an individual or as a group? What does it mean to lose that voice? We live in a time of a sharpening social divide between those with opportunities to participate in political life, and those who feel left behind by politics altogether, remaining passive. It seems that alongside increasing social and economic inequality, there is a growing divide between those who actively participate in the political life of the society around them, and those who perceive their ability to influence politics as non-existent.

In this article I make use of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology to conceptualize and present a disclosing critique of a phenomenon which I have decided to call *aphonia*, or the loss of one's own public voice. This conception of *aphonia* offers a correction to theories of democracy which tacitly assume a citizen who is unproblematically willing and able to voice their opinion on matters concerning them. I investigate how public speech can be understood as an expressive modality of the lived body, which can be lost due to experiences of suffering economic and social marginalization. I claim that this makes it hard for already dominated groups to make their frustrations and concerns known in public. Entire social groups therefore can, through no fault of their own, become silenced.

I first discuss Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology as a tool for disclosing critique. I then present some examples from sociological literature, which describe how economically marginalized and politically apathetic persons and groups can perceive their political marginalization as frustrating and constraining, while feeling unable to speak out in public about their marginalization. These examples present a phenomenon which appears widespread in Western democracies while remaining largely unconceptualized by mainstream political philosophy. I conceptualize such *aphonia* as a result of the internalization of experiences of social marginalization into what Merleau-Ponty calls the "operative intentionality" of the lived body. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology helps me to show how this process also has a perceptual effect. As one slowly and unknowingly acquires the habit of remaining silent in public and withdrawing from public participation due to, for example, feelings of frustration, powerlessness, and shame, one may quite literally have the words with which to protest one's condition taken out of one's mouth. *Aphonia*, then, does not mean losing the human capacity of speech, but the ability to see oneself as a credible and able public speaker allowed to have a voice of one's own. I finish with a call for grass-roots initiatives for engendering political participation among those suffering from *aphonia*.

Phenomenology as a Method for Disclosing Critique

My chosen method situates this article alongside a recent wave of interest in "political phenomenology": a philosophical approach which draws from twentieth-century phenomenology. This approach is exemplified by the recent broad collection of articles edited by Thomas Bedorf and Steffen Hermann (2020a). Political phenomenology does not present a unified movement with either a well-defined methodological toolkit or a shared normative stance. It is instead an attempt to rethink fundamental themes of contemporary political philosophy through engagement with the

tradition of phenomenology. Political phenomenology uses phenomenological description and diagnoses of particular experiences, as well as diagnoses of contemporary political phenomena, to investigate the commonplace abstractions of mainstream political philosophy. In this article I use existential phenomenology as a tool for what Nikolas Kompridis (2005) calls “disclosing critique”; a way of revealing possibilities that have been left unnoticed in current social arrangements, and also a way to give voice to experiences of suffering that have heretofore been left unexamined.

Contemporary political philosophy and theory has approached political marginalization and apathy in various ways. Traditionally theories of participatory democracy have described political marginalization as a lack of social goods, for example, the opportunities and resources for effective political participation. Such a lack is a matter to be addressed by a more just distribution of resources to ensure equality of opportunities and the formulation of more inclusive democratic procedures. James Bohman (1997) has objected to this view, noting that what is at issue is not only the poverty of opportunities and resources, but also the lack of recognition as an equal and the inability to acquire the cognitive and communicative capabilities required for effective participation in public, or what he calls “equality of effective freedom”. Another strand of political theory describes the phenomenon as political exclusion, or the exclusion from democratic participation in public deliberative processes on decisions that concern one’s own interests (Allen 2005; Benhabib 2004; Young 2000).

What has been left unnoticed by all of these approaches is something that theories of participatory democracy tend take for granted: the motivation of citizens to become politically engaged even when they are formally included within democratic processes; and the possibilities, resources, and communicative and cognitive capabilities to participate in public deliberation. After all, who would not want to participate in the making of decisions that affect one’s own interests when presented with the opportunity to do so? When political philosophy tacitly assumes a motivated and capable subject, withdrawing one’s democratic participation becomes understood as the result of a knowingly made choice. When someone does not participate in political processes by, for example, making their concerns known in public deliberation, or even by casting their vote when given the chance, it is easy to describe them as having knowingly and wilfully delegated one’s share of political power over to others.

Approaching the matter as a form of lacking resources or capabilities, or as a form of being left outside the political community, or as the result of a willingly made choice to not participate, does not describe an important facet of political passivity. The picture of political agency behind much of contemporary democratic theory does not consider the effect of social marginalization on one’s ability to perceive oneself as a capable and credible political agent. Possessing political

agency not only means having the communicative capabilities required for effective participation, but also involves a subjective, affective component: *feeling* included, feeling like an able and credible political agent who is allowed to participate in the public life of one's community. Losing this feeling is a form of marginalization that can be approached as being separate from poverty as the lack of resources and opportunities, or the lack of cognitive and communicative capabilities required for effective political participation.

What, then, is exactly meant by *aphonia*, and how is existential phenomenology to be used to approach the issue? My usage of the term follows Nikolas Kompridis (2008, 301–3), who uses it to describe the loss of a sense of having a “voice of one's own” in public. Kompridis, however, does not develop the term much further in the article, leaving me room to perform a disclosing critique that, through a phenomenological approach, aims to give voice to a heretofore unacknowledged injustice.

Something of the nature of *aphonia*, losing the ability to express oneself, can be apprehended from a clinical example from Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (2012, 164 ff.) describes how a teenager, due to a tense family situation, suddenly starts suffering from muteness or *aphonia*. The inability to speak is clearly connected to the emotionally loaded conflict between family members, and as the situation is resolved, the *aphonia* disappears as well.

What catches Merleau-Ponty's attention is the way that the *aphonia* takes over the person in a fashion that is independent of their conscious will. The person suffering from *aphonia* does not, even on a deeper unconscious level, “choose” to remain silent. *Aphonia* is not a case of a voluntary limitation of one's freedom, since “To have lost one's voice is not to keep quiet: one only keeps quiet when one can speak,” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 164). What has taken place is an impoverishment of a form of intentional experience that is “prior to both knowledge and ignorance, and prior to voluntary assertion and negation.” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 165) What has taken place is the disappearance of an expressive modality of one's being, a disappearance of the possibility to speak from experience:

The will presupposes a field of possible among which I choose: here is Pierre, I can choose to speak to him or not. If, however, I lose my power of speech, then Pierre no longer exists for me as a desired or rejected interlocutor. The entire field of possibilities collapses, and I even cut myself off from the mode of communication and signification that is silence.
(Merleau-Ponty 2012, 165)

I claim that such a “collapse of the field of possibilities” can, to a less radical degree, also happen to one’s ability to speak out in public. Kompridis (2008, 300–2) describes the way suffering social hardships can also lead to political *aphonia* as suffering not just from the lack of words to put one’s suffering in, but a “voice of one’s own”, the very ability to even attempt to articulate one’s suffering politically in the first place. What is missing in such situations is something often tacitly taken for granted by philosophy of democracy: the ability to speak and express oneself authentically in public, and with it, the desire and motivation to engage with politics. I propose that in cases of *aphonia*, what has disappeared is a sense of being able to perceive speaking and acting politically as a meaningful possibility in one’s intentional experience. I will next present some empirical examples of ways that internalization of negative social experiences can have an effect on the ability of an individual or a group to openly express themselves in public.

Examples from Sociological Literature

The usual approach of theories of justice, based on the scientific appraisal of social phenomena and comparing them to a rationally derived set of “objectively” valid philosophical norms, is badly suited for identifying the kinds of injustices that only signal themselves as *absences* of something. I believe that a phenomenon like *aphonia* is best approached by beginning from an investigation of particular examples that present different facets of an experienced injustice. Through a phenomenological diagnosis of such examples, a picture emerges: in this case an inability to speak in a voice of one’s own in public. This is qualitatively different from an objectively measurable lack of participational resources and opportunities, or cognitive and communicative capabilities required for effective deliberative participation (cf. Bohman 1997).

I begin from a description by Finnish sociologist Eeva Luhtakallio and journalist Maria Mustranta of the frustration felt by the residents of a disadvantaged neighbourhood in Helsinki:

During her years of fieldwork Eeva became more and more bothered by the observation that among the residents of the area the primary feeling associated with belonging to a society was frustration. Getting to know the residents made quickly clear that people were not – of course not – stupid or inactive, far from it. But many seemed to lack an understanding of

what could be done about frustrating things, and the faith in the capacity of one's own actions to change things.¹

Luhtakallio and Mustranta then proceed to relate a description of a social milieu whose inhabitants, despite their awareness of their situation, and definitely despite not being “stupid and inactive”, remain unmotivated to become politically engaged and to challenge their political exclusion. This is due to lacking both the understanding of how to change things, and the faith, or confidence, in their ability to enact that change. This loss of confidence in oneself is described by Luhtakallio and Mustranta as the internalized result of a stream of negative social experiences, often in the hands of ostensibly well-meaning actors and social institutions who are supposed to be helping them. Especially illustrative is their description of how the residents described their experience of public education, the social institution that was supposed to be helping them towards social advancement:

School memories are not the same for everyone. Here they appeared to become a seamless part of that humiliating inheritance of being branded stupid and incapable which many carried with them as their main experience of the whole of society.²

Luhtakallio and Mustranta (2017, 55) describe how, for many of the residents, their entire experience of society is a stream of experiences of humiliation and being made to feel inferior by public actors and institutions, often beginning already from school. Such experiences have left many of the residents intensely suspicious of anything “official” and mistrustful of the same political and social institutions that are supposed to be helping them. Feelings of frustration, hostility, and mistrust appear to colour the perception of the residents when it comes to society as a whole. (Luhtakallio and Mustranta 2017, 56–7) This sense of being left outside society is even noted to have a perceptual effect:

While the networked activist is browsing through the contact information of ten different council members on their cell phone to push their agenda forward, there is elsewhere a

¹ “Vuosien kenttätöiden aikana Eevaa alkoi yhä enemmän vaivata havainto siitä, että alueen asukkaiden päällimmäisin yhteiskuntaan kuulumiseen liittyvä tunne tuntui olevan turhautuminen. Asukkaisiin tutustuminen teki nopeasti selväksi sen, että ihmiset eivät – tietenkään – olleet tyhmiä tai toimettomia, kaukana siitä. Mutta monilta tuntui puuttuvan käsitys siitä, mitä turhauttaville asioille voisi tehdä, ja usko siihen, että omalla tekemisellä voi olla vaikutusta.” (Luhtakallio and Mustranta 2017, 14)

All translations from Finnish are by the author.

² ”Koulumuistot eivät kuitenkaan ole kaikille samanlaisia. Täällä ne tuntuivat liittyvän saumattomaksi osaksi sitä nöyryyttävää tyhmäksi ja kyvyttömäksi leimaamisen perintöä, jota moni kantoi mukanaan päällimmäisenä kokemuksenaan koko yhteiskunnasta.” (Luhtakallio and Mustranta 2017, 55)

group that does not protest or participate in associations, nor set up trendy street festivals. Their city looks completely different – it is not a playground of imagination where everyone can bring their own contribution, nor are the decision makers reachable by phone or a Facebook message, but could just as well reside in another reality. They see their possibilities to influence society, or even to belong to it, as non-existent.³

This perceptual effect, the inability to see society as something one can influence, or even belong to, is something which appears to be intimately connected to the ability to express oneself in public, an idea I will return to below.

It is important to note that democratic politics thrive on a certain amount of distrust. Mark E. Warren notes that it is by distrusting those in power that we also come to democratically hold them to account (Warren 1999a, 320). However, democracy cannot function without a kind of “generalized trust” which reflects “the capacities of individuals and groups to act for common ends as well as to represent their interests to the state”, without which corrupt governments can take hold of society (Warren 1999b, 12). This kind of generalized trust can also be understood as giving to experience a certain “background sense” of security that allows a citizen to make use of their abilities to reach outside oneself in engagement with their social world. Such action is facilitated when one is reasonably secure in the knowledge that they won’t be received with ridicule, indifference, or hostility. The loss of such a trust can be experienced as debilitating, as described by Luhtakallio and Mustranta:

When you discuss politics, participation, and influencing with the local residents, the conversations convey a sense of disappointment and distrust. Society should be the guarantor of help in face of life's ordeals, but this promise has been repeatedly broken. No-one has noticed their distress, or it has not been responded to. The comments also echo with the bitterness brought about by false promises:

³ ”Mutta samaan aikaan kun verkostoitunut aktivisti selaa kymmenen kunnanvaltuutetun yhteystietoja kännykästään viedäkseen asiaansa eteenpäin, on toisaalla joukko, joka ei osoita mieltään tai osallistu juuri yhdistystoimintaan sen enempää kuin järjestä trendikkäitä katufestareitakaan. Heidän kaupunkinsa on aivan eri näköinen – se ei ole mielikuvituksen temmelyskenttä, johon jokainen voi tuoda oman panoksensa, eikä sitä koskeva päätöksenteko ole puhelinnumeron tai Facebook-viestin päässä vaan pikemminkin aivan toisessa todellisuudessa. He näkevät mahdollisuutensa vaikuttaa yhteiskuntaan, jopa ylipäättään kuulumisensa siihen, olemattomina.” (Luhtakallio and Mustranta 2017, 118)

“Everyone can make something out of themselves.” “If given the chance.” “But they always pull the rug from under your feet.”⁴

A loss of such a trust from one’s perception is, in many ways, analogous to the loss of what Anthony Giddens (1992, 37–8) describes as “ontological security”. It is the basis for a stable sense of positive self-identity and social continuity and a sense of belonging to a social fabric. It illuminates one’s fundamental background characteristic of *aphonia*: the damaging of the background affective disposition of trust in one’s peers and social institutions which forms the bedrock of a sense of having political agency. This loss of trust in others of the social world is mirrored in loss of trust in one’s own ability to effectively function inside that world in concert with similarly situated others. This also has a deleterious effect on being able to perceive oneself as a credible and able agent, a person with a voice of their own. Such a loss of a sense of security changes one’s perception of the social world and the possibilities within it.

Luhtakallio and Mustranta’s description of the lives of residents of the unnamed Helsinki neighbourhood testify to a similar kind of reality as Simon Charlesworth’s 2000 phenomenological study on his old hometown of Rotherham in South Yorkshire and its working-class inhabitants, a world from which he himself hails. He uses the tools of existential phenomenology to describe a social milieu suffering from extreme economic hardship, characterized by some of the worst levels of poverty in the Western world. Loss of industry since the 1980s has led to the loss of a credible future horizon for social advancement of its working-class residents. To compound their hopelessness, they are also largely failed by the inability of public institutions, such as education and job programs, to provide meaningful ways forward. What especially interests Charlesworth is the destructive effect that living in such conditions has on the ability of the residents to authentically express their discomfort and political domination. Working-class Rotherham is described as a world that actively curtails and frustrates the “generative competences for language use and expressive behaviours” of its residents, a phenomenon not adequately captured by the statistical tools often employed by sociologists (Charlesworth 2000, 3).

Charlesworth describes how his research work was made harder by the fact that even people with whom he was intimate were hard to interview because they did not feel comfortable with

⁴ ”Kun alueen asukkaiden kanssa puhuu politiikasta, osallistumisesta ja vaikuttamisesta, keskusteluista välittyy pettymys ja epäluottamus. Yhteiskunnan pitäisi olla takuu avusta silloin, kun elämä koettelee, mutta tämä lupaus on toistuvasti rikottu. Kukaan ei ole huomannut hätää, tai siihen ei ole vastattu. Kommenteissa kaikuu myös falskien lupausen herättämä katkeruus:

”Kaikista on johonkin.” ”Jos annetaan mahdollisuus.” ”Mutta kun aina vedetään matto jalkojen alta.” (Luhtakallio and Mustranta 2017, 26–7)

speaking. Charlesworth expresses his frustration at the way how people who he knew “to be articulate, thoughtful, insightful and powerfully evocative in their speech, exhibited tendencies of shy restraint as soon as one formalizes the situation, even simply through the introduction of a tape recorder.” (Charlesworth 2000, 137) People who were just moments earlier presenting insightful analyses of their situation became silent with the insertion of the recorder into the equation. According to Charlesworth, there is something in the lived experience of the subjects of his study which leads them to suffering from a form of damage done to the very capability to authentically express oneself in public, as if one were afraid of the expressive medium itself (Charlesworth 2000, 283). This is combined with a sense of not being a part of the processes of the society around them. It is as if they are left only with the role of spectators, not agents in their own right:

The world has become occurrent to them, something they experience ‘from the outside’, that is, from a position of non-involvement. Possibilities no longer solicit them. They experience a radical discontinuity, an unsettledness emanating from the grounds of the body’s projection into the future which creates a sense of the loss of meaning of their lives and yet which makes the meaninglessness of the world in which they live more explicit. (Charlesworth 2000, 79)

Such descriptions reveal another important aspect of the phenomenon I aim to describe and diagnose. It is not that Charlesworth’s interviewees did not possess the linguistic skills to describe their situation, nor have they suddenly chosen to remain silent at the introduction of the tape recorder. Instead, they suddenly find themselves unable to speak in a situation perceived as “official”, resembling the residents described by Luhtakallio and Mustranta. They do not feel “socially instituted to have opinions”, and as the official language doesn’t feel like theirs to use, they often fall back to the “ultimate euphemization of silence”, a feeling so strong it takes hold of them against their own will. (Charlesworth 2000, 135–7) Charlesworth is worried that the entire social world he is speaking of is being enveloped by silence, as those living in it lose the ability to give voice to their situation (Charlesworth 2000, 3).

This silence that is endured, in a sense, even against one’s will, encapsulates what I mean by not having a political voice of one’s own. Such *aphonia* must be approached as something negative, something which reveals itself only as an absence: public silence not as choosing to stay silent, but rather as silence as the absence in the field of experience of the very possibility of speaking out. It has its roots not in lacking (narrowly defined) cognitive and communicative capabilities, but in the way human beings inhabit their environments and interact with them on a pre-cognitive level of

embodied awareness that is primordial to conscious awareness. It is also at this pre-cognitive level of bodily existence that our expressive capacities, use of language included, take root as certain types of habits, which are intimately connected to our bodily existence and the way our bodies perceive their environments as perceptual fields already flush with a sense of meaning and possibility or their absence. I believe that the best method for approaching this pre-cognitive level of intentional experience is Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the perceiving and expressive body.

Speech as an Expressive Modality of the Body

I believe that the above examples provided by both Luhtakallio and Mustranta and Charlesworth testify to different aspects of a phenomenon of losing one's own political voice, an injustice which contemporary theories of democracy have not yet adequately conceptualized. This is due to an insufficient analysis of the experiential conditions of being able to speak in public in the first place. While critical conceptions of exclusion and injustice go a long way towards helping us understand the problem, they are unable to consider the subjective side of the equation: the feeling of being unable to appear and speak competently in public.

What is at issue is a deeply seated experience of oneself as not capable of speaking in public situations, the feeling of lacking the "proper" words, even if in private one was, like Charlesworth's interlocutors, an intelligent and eloquent analyst of one's situation. To understand this phenomenon, I use Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to approach public speech as one modality of a more general embodied expressivity. Merleau-Ponty's concepts of operative intentionality, body-subject and the lived body allow us to understand how human beings continuously relate to their social environment on a pre-cognitive, pre-discursive embodied level of perceptual intentionality.

This approach is indebted to the work of Edmund Husserl, and his conception of intentionality, the way that conscious experience is always consciousness *about* something, upon which Merleau-Ponty builds. With "operative intentionality," Merleau-Ponty describes a form of intentionality that is primordial to conscious reflective intentionality; the knowledge that, for example, I am aware that I am currently experiencing something (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxxii). Operative intentionality is a pre-cognitive, embodied form of intentionality that offers conscious experience the perceptual field which it encounters as objectivity. This field is already experienced as meaningful, that is, a field of not only visual phenomena, but also an affective field. This means

that we perceive the world as already presenting a field which pulls us towards certain possibilities while repelling us from others. As such, the world already presents us with solicitations for action.

Central to Merleau-Ponty's project in the *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012) is the conception of the human being as a body-subject: the intertwining of a subjective, reflexive consciousness and the objective being of the body as a physical object which is encountered as such by other human beings. This intertwining is mediated by the "lived body", something which, in a sense, "comes before" our conscious sense of self as a perceiving being. Our experience is always rooted in an "anonymous" level of bodily experience that exhibits an agency of its own that is somewhat alien to us, as it is the repository of unconscious habits and meanings, acquired during one's lifetime. It is the lived end-product of an extensive social conditioning through the process of living a singular, particular life in a particular place and time. The resulting "habitual body" includes not only mostly unconscious habits of comporting one's body and expressing oneself, but also a certain style of perceptual organisation, and even creation, of space around oneself in a perceptual field that the body-subject encounters as objectivity. As Monika Langer describes it, "The 'habitual body' already projects a habitual setting around itself, thereby giving a general structure to the subject's situation." (Langer 1989, 31.) In this way the "sedimentation", or incorporation of past experiences, meanings and knowledge into one's lived body, results in a personal style of being, acquired over time, combining cognition, perception and the motor intentionality of the body itself (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 113). The body-subject projects meaningful space around itself through interrogating its surroundings in an organic manner, giving it a sense of meaningfulness. This allows the world to present in perceptual experience a field of meaningful possibilities for action that the body-subject can act towards.

The lived body, then, is primordial to one's reflective intentionality and awareness or consciousness, presenting a somewhat autonomous and anonymous level of being. It is a product of sedimentation of meanings and social practices into somewhat stable habits of acting and seeing, forming the ground of all our agentic capacities. The spontaneity inherent to human freedom must be understood as the movement in which a body-subject improvises on meanings already sedimented within itself according to a developed personal style to answer solicitations present in its perceptual field. This expressive movement of the body outside itself mixes the cognitive, the perceptual and the motor intentionality of the lived body, and also includes our capacity for language – the primary medium of politics.

The lived body spontaneously relates to its social environment, improvising on the shared meanings it finds within it and thereby answers the solicitations presented by the field with which it is engaged. Expressivity includes ways of inhabiting a place, of bodily comportment and action

through which we appear to others both as human beings and as physical objects that are perceived and valued by others. This is a relationship that can become damaged or even destroyed when the experiential conditions for acquiring these expressive capacities are curtailed or lacking in the situation one inhabits in a given society.

The ability to express oneself, to project oneself freely into the world, can be understood as a product of sedimentation of positive social experiences. In successful social interactions, a kind of a positive feedback loop takes place. As one is given positive feedback for one's overtures towards the world, a positive sense of "being able" begins to take root in experience. However, a similar feedback loop can also feed on negative experiences, curtailing one's ability to freely express oneself. The bleak social realities in which many marginalized groups find themselves often actively frustrate the acquisition of expressive capacities and the ability to relate to ones' social environment. These social realities, therefore, can even constrain the cognitive capabilities of those inhabiting them to make sense of their experiences and to express them in public.

We are always part and parcel of the historical situation we find ourselves always already thrown into and constituted by; this does not foreclose our freedom to act out of our own will, but instead gives us the field of meaningful possibilities we can act towards. Our ontological intertwining with our situation means that political agency is not merely a matter of exercising one's autonomous will, but instead an unstable process that is shot through with the ambiguity inherent to our embodied being. It is due to our lived body projecting meaning around itself in this process of intertwining that our situations appear to us as soliciting us to act upon them. It is in the pre-reflective perceptual relationship of the lived body to its social environment that the body-subject encounters a world and communicates with it. It is also there that we can start to understand the root of *aphonia* as an obstacle to exercising one's political freedoms as a citizen of a democratic community.

***Aphonia* as an Obstacle to Freedom**

We can now turn towards *aphonia* as a political phenomenon. *Aphonia* is not an objective state of affairs that could be judged to be a violation of a pre-political, philosophically reached norm given by an "ideal" theory of justice, such as that of John Rawls (1999). Examples of such injustices would be material poverty or exclusion from equal democratic participation. Nor is it a purely internal matter of subjective attitude. The experienced incapability to speak out in public and to make a difference is the incorporated result of inhabiting a certain place in society, a certain

historical situation. As seen in the above examples provided by Luhtakallio & Mustranta and Charlesworth, *aphonia* is associated with inhabiting a certain kind of social world which offers little possibilities for learning how political engagement “works” and provides little hope that one’s actions could actually change something for the better. What mainstream philosophical approaches lack is precisely the focus on how such conditions become *incorporated* through sedimentation and can form an obstacle to feeling like one is a capable and credible witness of one’s own suffering.

It is now possible to see how *aphonia* is a phenomenon intimately connected to the expressive capacities of the lived body, and therefore also connected to the affective background of perception. A person “without a voice of their own” is not necessarily objectively lacking in resources or the communicative capabilities required for effective democratic participation, even if the lack of such capabilities contributes to their *aphonia*. Instead, they might be unable to perceive in their environment a field that would welcome their participation, or give a sense of opportunities for speaking out. Quite the contrary, the world might appear as indifferent to their concerns or even actively hostile to their presence.

Aphonia might be a result of multiple empirical causes: these include being a member of a social group whose members are not recognized as social equals; objectively lacking the linguistic capabilities which would allow them to present themselves as credible political speakers, or even due to simply feeling like “persons like them” are “not political”. I leave aside the empirical matter of exact causation, as what this article attempts to describe is the political quality of *aphonia*, the way it constitutes an injustice. *Aphonia* is an injustice because it constitutes an obstacle to exercising one’s share of political freedom. According to Merleau-Ponty, freedom is meaningless unless considered against its context, the situation in which the body-subject finds itself. Freedom is experienced as meaningful when there is a situation one can perceive as calling for action, that presents some possibilities or “cycles of behaviour” one can take up which would be left unrealized without acting upon them (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 462). Freedom can be understood as a successful interaction between a body-subject and a field, a kind of fit Merleau-Ponty describes as a “gearing into” a situation which “calls forth privileged modes of resolution and that it, by itself, lacks the power to procure any of them.” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 467) Freedom, then, always means “taking up” the solicitations presented by an existing situation through becoming engaged and involved with it, and perhaps even attempting to change it.

Nick Crossley provides an interesting approach to freedom by describing how citizenship can be understood as an intersubjectively constituted role that one must inhabit in a meaningful sense to experience political participation as a meaningful possibility:

In order to perform their role, citizens must have a shared sense of that role, a sense of citizenship. And they must have the know-how required to perform that role competently. ‘Citizenship’ must be meaningful to them as a group. It must be a constitutive feature of their shared interworld and an identity which each assumes therein. It must be embedded in the texture of taken-for-granted assumptions which comprise the meaning horizon of our everyday life; that is, in the (intersubjectively constituted) lifeworld (Roche 1987; Schutz 1964). (Crossley 1996, 151)

Crossley describes a way to approach citizenship as a role that one inhabits to a degree that it becomes invisible: citizenship becomes a part of the horizon of experience against which things and phenomena of the social world can appear as meaningful objects of political engagement. The social world comes to present a meaningful field one can become engaged in. This could be compared to the way Hannah Arendt describes the public world as something which only exists in interactions between men, a “web” that action and speech knit over the material world of artefacts (Arendt 1998, 182–3). This way of relating to the social world as a political matter can be approached as a facet of the expressivity of the lived body, something that a person can also lose due to little fault of their own.

As an example, Miranda Fricker describes how a negative social stereotype about a social group, for example, “the members of this group are not politically active”, can become internalized by the members of said group to a degree that they withdraw their political participation – as if through a learned habit:

...we can imagine an informally disenfranchised group, whose tendency not to vote arises from the fact that their collectively imagined social identity is such that they are not the sort of people who go in for political thinking and discussion. ‘People like us aren't political’; and so they do not vote. (Fricker 2007, 16)

Fricker notes that the converse can also be the case: members of a group whose shared identity includes an image of the self as an active and capable political agent are more likely, for instance, to go out and vote (ibid.). Fricker’s example of an internalized negative self-image describes something of the phenomenon at hand: that of an internalized sense of oneself as incapable to act, to speak out in public. This sense can become an obstacle to freedom, as one loses a sense of oneself as a political agent, and of political engagement as a field which presents meaningful possibilities for action.

Production of citizenship as a meaningful role is connected to a welcoming and egalitarian civic culture. It is not simply a discursive affair, but a product of embodied *mimesis*, of learning “body-to-body” how to appear in public as a citizen among equals. Charlesworth describes how the subjects of his study have, as a class, fallen outside such civic culture:

Such conditions of scarcity amidst affluence, of severe vulnerability amidst images of security, of dislocation without movement, have led to the creation of a class in which many have come to appear ‘odd’, abject, because they have been unable to participate in spaces in which they could learn, mimetically, body-to-body, the manners and styles of deportment of the accomplished adult, attuned to the respectable world of a civilized realm in which there exists, practically and dispositionally, a civic culture oriented to public civility.

(Charlesworth 2000, 159.)

One learns such civic culture through the practices of being a citizen and in time these become incorporated into the horizon of operative intentional experience. This is sedimentation at work: one incorporates a civil form of being and perceiving into one’s living body, allowing the world to appear as a field of possibilities for speaking and acting. In speech, the body-subject re-activates those sedimented meanings and practices. When one lacks possibilities for learning how to be in civil society, the very public realm itself begins to appear as a distant place one does not inhabit, a separate world from one’s own. To compound the problem, those who do not know “how to be” in public often stand out as abject, stigmatized beings, running the danger of becoming objects of shunning or ridicule by others.

The cultural specificity and social power relations present in conversational norms which guide public discussion are an important facet of political exclusion (Young 2000, 55 ff.). However, we should also pay attention to how economic poverty and social marginalization can become sedimented into the habitual body as the limiting of the body’s very capacity to express itself more or less confidently in public. What to a middle-class educated eye appears as self-evident, the fact of human beings equally possessing speech, is revealed by a phenomenological analysis to be a socially constituted and contingent state of affairs.

Pierre Bourdieu notes that politically dominated groups can silently reject the “official” world and language of politics while remaining dispossessed of the means of presenting one’s own alternative to them (Bourdieu 1991, 51–2). Effective political agency is contingent on being able to perceive politics as a field of meaningful possibilities towards which one may act. If one becomes unable to perceive the world around them as containing meaningful possibilities, or possibilities to

engage in social practices which could create such possibilities, then one is left without a horizon in which effecting change is perceived as possible.

Aphonia, then, is something more than a lack of objectively measurable resources or capabilities. As Merleau-Ponty writes:

If there were no cycles of behaviour, no open situations that call for a certain completion and that can act as a foundation, either for a decision that confirms them or for one that transforms them, then freedom would never take place. [...] If freedom is to have *a field to work with*, if it must be able to assert itself as freedom, then something must separate freedom from its ends, freedom must have *a field*; that is, it must have some privileged possibilities or realities that must tend to be preserved in being. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 462)

If one inhabits a situation lacking in such “possibilities or realities”, then it is this very lack that may become sedimented into one’s lived body. This curtails the ability to perceive possibilities where someone better situated might be able to see them and act upon them. One might become subjectively justified in thinking that speaking has become meaningless even when there is no objective confirmation to justify such a feeling. After all, why speak when there is nobody who would listen? This means it would be meaningless to ask a person suffering from *aphonia* for confirmation to the contrary. What matters is precisely that they are unable to perceive any possibility for effecting meaningful change while having lost confidence in their own ability to voice their frustration and suffering in public.

Combating *Aphonia* through Therapeutic Encouragement and Engagement

As described in the examples above, the tendency among marginalized persons to withdraw from civil public life to suffer in silence is often combined with a suspicion towards, and even fear of, anything “official”. In such a situation, even well-meaning measures towards political inclusion through, for example, participation in democratic processes which are directed from above, are apt to backfire. When one already perceives “official” situations as off-putting due to, for example, the shame one feels when forced to appear and speak in public in the presence of “one’s betters”, even well-meaning demands for inclusive democratic participation can have the unwanted result of driving away the very people that one is trying to draw into political engagement. I do not claim to present ready solutions to ameliorate such situations. However, I will end this essay by presenting

the story of a possible approach which begins from grass-roots engagement with politically marginalized persons.

Luhtakallio and Mustranta (2017) tell their story in the context of a community project which attempts to draw the politically marginalized residents of a disadvantaged Helsinki neighbourhood into political engagement. After many failures in getting through to the residents of the neighbourhood, usually stemming from their own preconceived notions of what political engagement “should” look like, Luhtakallio and Mustranta finally themselves realize that what is needed is a change of perspective and approach. Instead of dragging the residents into protests and badgering them to participate in direct political action, something which none of them had ever seen any meaning in, Luhtakallio and Mustranta began attending to the affective needs of the residents. They tried to make the residents feel welcome and appreciated through simple and relatively inexpensive things like offering meals and drinks, making sure that single mothers have the possibility to attend the meetings through providing childcare, and even paying for a taxi trip to the theatre, a rare luxury for the residents.

An important facet of the issue was that many of the residents had never felt wanted and appreciated in public situations, something which an educated middle-class outsider has a hard time understanding. After this sense of being unwelcome and ignored was attended to, things started moving forward. Ultimately the project leaders and the residents collaborated in a community theatre project in which an entire political play about marginalized immigrant residents of the neighbourhood was written by the residents themselves, with assistance from theatre professionals. Most of the residents had never conceived of themselves as capable of such a feat, yet with resources and encouragement, they enthusiastically completed the project and held their play at the local community centre.

After the play, the project disbanded, with seemingly little results: some participants continued their new hobby as amateur thespians, but for most, life assumed its usual course. However, this is only a failure on the standards of seasoned political activists, with their own preconceived notions of what constitutes a success. For the participants, the project was an important experience of finally having their say in a world that is largely indifferent, even hostile, to their concerns, an experience which might bear fruit later in unexpected ways. Perhaps one of their children may decide to join a political party or start a social media drive for some cause. Perhaps they teach someone else that engagement is possible and does matter. There are no certain outcomes, only the opening of new possibilities.

I have decided to describe Luhtakallio and Mustranta’s grass roots approach as “therapeutic”, because, instead of worrying about systemic and society-encompassing objectively

verifiable forms of political injustice, it attends to the subjective experiences and emotions of marginalized persons and attempts to acknowledge and address them first. The results achieved by such an approach are, perhaps, somewhat beneath the grand systemic ambitions of critical theories of democracy. This does not mean that they would not still have an important effect among persons and groups suffering from *aphonia*. Helping individual persons and groups to find their own voice as citizens after an entire lifetime of being made to feel inferior and incapable might also be an efficient way to combat *aphonia* in a way that is felt as effective by those who have heretofore been unable to authentically express themselves on their own terms.

Concluding Remarks

We can now see how the conception of *aphonia* I have presented describes a situation which is qualitatively different from not having the opportunity to speak, whether due to being excluded from a political community or due to lacking the necessary material resources and cognitive and communicative capabilities to do so. *Aphonia* describes the disappearance of the possibility of speaking out in public from the field of possibilities present in experience. It is a phenomenon that, as I have shown above, can be disclosed by a phenomenological approach to critique which begins from an understanding of speech as rooted in the broader expressive capacities of the lived body. Merleau-Ponty's conception of operative intentionality as a dialectic between the lived body and its environment is uniquely suited to understanding how language and speech form but one expressive modality of the lived body, and as such, are always dependent on the continuous process of the intertwining of the lived body with its environment and the meanings found therein.

The expressivity of the lived body is a dimension of experience which is often not adequately recognized by democratic theory. Instead of thinking public speech in terms of capabilities, as skills or abilities which allow one to "function" effectively in society (Bohman 1997, 325), we should be thinking about speech, and the more general category of expressivity, from a phenomenological perspective which presents expressivity as a body-subject's way of responding to the solicitations present in its perceived field of possibilities.

The kinds of structurally enforced silences, curtailings of expressive capacities and experiences of *aphonia* suffered by marginalized groups the world over are such burning injustices because those suffering from them are denied the possibility of appearing as capable political agents amongst their peers. Instead, the lack of confidence to express themselves in public prevents the political voicing of their concerns and furthers their political marginalization. *Aphonia* is thus not

another type of objective inequality that could be approached as a question of unjust distribution of social goods, be they resources, recognition, or adequate capabilities. It is a question of losing a practical sense of certain possibilities that, in a functioning democracy, should in principle be present in the field of experience of every citizen.

In an egalitarian society, every citizen should have the equal possibility of learning to feel the role of citizenship as something which belongs to them, conferring them a voice of their own. Since *aphonia* can be presented as the result of a sedimentation of experienced political domination into relatively stable habits of perception, comportment, and use of language, it also describes how the least powerful can end up being the least capable of expressing themselves in public. As one is stripped of their sources of positive self-identity as an equal member of a political community, one can lose one's own voice, the capability to express oneself authentically on one's own terms, to make one's frustrations and sufferings known in public.

I have in this article presented a disclosing critique of the phenomenon of *aphonia* as the loss of a political "voice of one's own" and shown how it can be approached through Maurice-Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology as the sedimentation of negative social experiences into the lived body of an individual due to them inhabiting a social situation involving economic and social marginalization. Such experiences can become internalized and incorporated into the operative intentionality of a body-subject to a degree it becomes almost impossible for them to perceive themselves as capable and credible citizens, and the world around them as a field of possibilities for political engagement which welcomes them as equals. This can damage the expressive capacities of the lived body to a degree that it becomes impossible to express one's frustrations and sufferings authentically in public: to have a voice of one's own.

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