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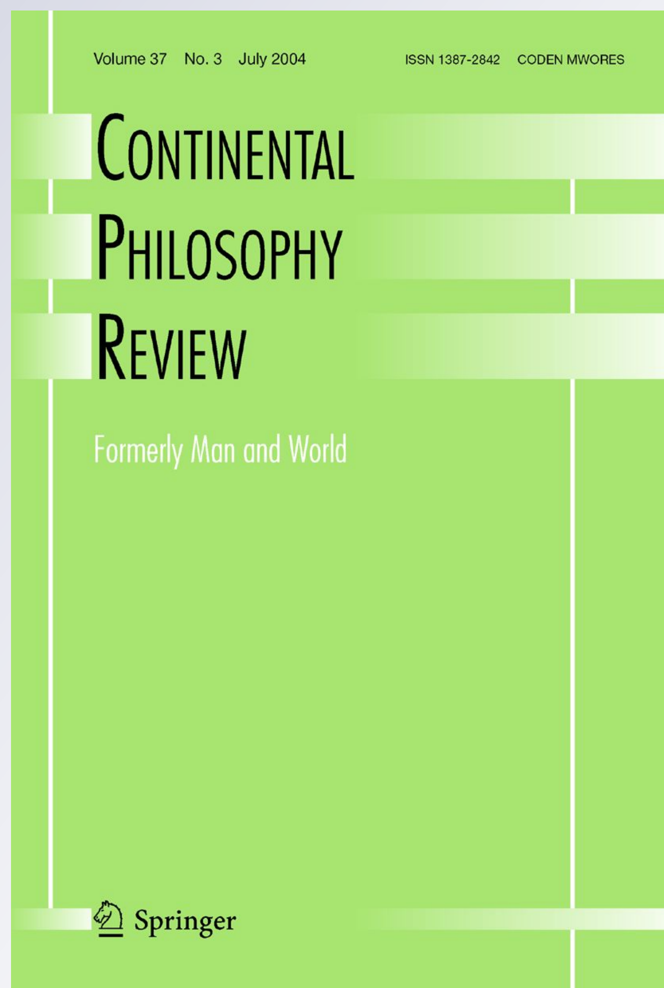

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Our element: Flesh and democracy in Merleau-Ponty

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Abstract Although Merleau-Ponty's early phenomenology of perception and his essays on art, politics, and language already showed an affinity between the aesthetic phenomena of expression and style and the political and cultural dynamics of society at large, this paper specifically focuses on his late theorizing of the notion of *flesh* and its relevance to his late understanding of politics and democracy. The emergence of flesh as a concept was contemporary to Merleau-Ponty's break with Marxism as a philosophical model and with revolutionary dialectics as a political project. It is by showing that such a break was consistently grounded on his theorizing of the being flesh of both the body and of society that this paper shows Merleau-Ponty's unique contribution to democratic theory and to contemporary political philosophy. In the course of this analysis, it will become clear that in philosophically breaking with the position of a "no that is a yes"—i.e. the model of the revolution, which implies a total negation of the given that becomes a total affirmation of the new order (dictatorship) once in power—he would politically embrace the Weberian "heroic liberalism"—or his "non-communist left"—of parliamentary democracy.

Keywords Flesh · Democracy · Machiavelli · Weber · Sartre · Habermas · Language · Dialectics · Plurality · Institution · Revolution

If language duplicated externally a thought…
it would not be our element as water is the element of fish.
Merleau-Ponty

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1 Introduction

Most of what passed for "democratic theory" in the United States in the past two or three decades has been dominated by normative or analytic approaches to the study of political life and institutions. Debates on institutional design or moral philosophy went from the liberal/libertarian/communitarian discussion of principles of justice to the consideration of deliberative and/or other procedural models for the justification of forms of action and decision-making. Contemporary to these debates, continental thought went from the structuralist embracement of strict relational—linguistic or ethnographic—models of social co-existence to the poststructuralist and deconstructivist critique of all established approaches to the study of democracy and other political phenomena. These two tracks of political theorizing, however, were dominant mostly in strictly academic contexts rather than in the broader field of the public debate—a field in which the intertwining of political struggles and political thinking, scholarly publishing and political action made democracy a field of multiply contesting discursive positions and practices. In this latter, broader—but not necessarily less sophisticated—milieu, philosophical reflection and political activity engaged, again and again, in the practice of interpreting the events of their time, and it was in these contexts that the "question of democracy" became a political and theoretical battlefield.

Historically speaking, quite a few of the theorists central to the first two aforementioned tracks of theoretical reflection on political phenomena played also a central role in the latter, broader conversation. On the one hand, American scholars such as Michael Walzer and Robert Nozick, or German social theorists such as Jürgen Habermas, became very much part of the public debate. On the other hand, thinkers such as Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Slavoj Žižek, or Claude Lefort, also very much inscribed in the continental tradition of political thought, became influential across disciplinary borders and beyond the strictly academic world. Several were the events that motivated these crisscrossings between academic theorizing and public acting and interpreting—from the "waves" of democratic transitions in South America and Eastern Europe to the global collapse of the Soviet model; from the emergence of American identity politics to the post-colonial theorizing of "Third" and "First" World politics; and from economic globalization and the anti-globalization movement to the "war on terror" and the advent of political Islam. It was in the context of the theorizing *from* these events and processes that the question of democracy was visited and revisited, in an effort for reconstituting what was once called the "emancipatory" project.

In the past few years, two new debates emerged in dialogue with this sequence of events and theoretical clashes. On the one hand, some in the political left—as a reaction to the defeat of the revolutionary project and its associated blind trust in the effectiveness of political violence—chose to reactivate the question of conflict and struggle along new lines, this time revisiting Carl Schmitt's controversial but immensely sophisticated understanding of the political. It was through this theoretical door, combined with the multiple questions posed by the revival of the religious right in America and Europe, and that of radical Islam in the Middle East, that the question of the theologico-political became once again a central field

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of political theorizing. On the other hand, the by the eighties and nineties largely abandoned phenomenological approach to the practice of political philosophy got reactivated by the relevance attributed to Hannah Arendt and Claude Lefort's ideas and theoretical perspectives during the aforementioned processes of transition to democracy, as well as with the rebirth of a democratic left willing to conceptually rearm with the help of other, non-Marxist traditions. It is one of the central inspirations behind this paper the claim that the reactivation of this (post)phenomenological tradition gave birth to a conception that fundamentally opposes the theologico-political view from the position of an aesthetic primacy of the plurality of perceptions and appearances in the understanding of the political. Faithful to this claim, the central goal of this paper is to present Merleau-Ponty's late theorizing of the notion of flesh, in tandem with his highly elaborated critique of revolutionary, teleological dialectics, as one of the central precedents behind the "non-communist" left's embracement of democracy as the form of society "we must look for."[1]

The paper as such is structured around three sections. In the first one, I will show how Merleau-Ponty's theorizing of the "element" of flesh became valid, in his own view, to all human institutions and practices, from the body to language and from the arts of expression to the very being of society. The second and third sections will present Merleau-Ponty's extension of his aesthetic and philosophical insights to the realm of politics proper. As Merleau-Ponty himself used to put it, the minimal unit of perception and meaning is the figure against the background. In these two chapters we will have the opportunity to consider Merleau-Ponty's evolving understanding of the political against the background of Machiavelli, Weber, Sartre, and Habermas' thought. In section two, I will analyze Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological defense of Machiavelli's views of action and politics, and this will become the proper preface to the way in which the former would sharply criticize Sartre's radical embracement of Communist politics. Finally, in section three of the paper we will discover how Merleau-Ponty found in Weber the unexpected ally he needed in his search for an alternative political model to that of teleological dialectics and the revolutionary project. In this final section, I will also contrast Merleau-Ponty's understanding of action and meaning with that of Habermas, in order to complete the picture of the former's quasi-philosophical justification of democracy and parliamentary politics as the only political forms that make room for "opposition and freedom"[2]—or, to anticipate his philosophical words, of hyper-reflection and hyperdialectics—in the institution of society.

2 Flesh and society

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy could be described as an intellectual evolution from the concept of the *body* to that of *flesh*. His *Phenomenology of Perception*, published in 1945, was a systematic critique of both the empiricist and idealist understandings of

[1] Merleau-Ponty (1995, p. 207).

[2] Ibid.

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the sensible experience—a critique in which the notion of the *body* played the central role. However, the book he was writing at the moment of his death in 1961 strove to go further. What was left of it—*The Visible and the Invisible*—is the unfinished attempt to overcome the limited concept of an embodied subject at which his earlier work had arrived. The central notion of Merleau-Ponty's late work was that of *flesh*—a reversible and indeterminate *element* that cannot be reduced to the old notions of subject or object. In his words: "the flesh is not matter…it is not a fact or a sum of facts 'material' or 'spiritual.' […] To designate it, we should need the old term 'element,' in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an 'element' of Being."[3]

An incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of Being, says Merleau-Ponty, indicating that, with the notion of flesh, he was not talking of the "style of being" of the body alone. The concept, appearing already in his writings during the fifties, but present "as element" even in his earlier works on perception and expression, slowly pervaded his entire interrogation of the disparate phenomena of speech and the dialectics, painting and the visible, and parliamentary democracy and the revolutionary project. What we are considering with these thoughts, he would say, is "whether every relation between me and Being, even vision, even speech, is not a carnal relation, with the flesh of the world."[4] That is why, at the intersubjective level, what Merleau-Ponty said of language, "our *element* as water is the element of fish,"[5] was equally valid for all forms of intercorporality. Language "has the same source, even the same style, as intercorporeal communication."[6] And both the notion of flesh in its most straightforward sense and in its extension to the intersubjective dimensions of language and society were explicitly developed in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

This book was meant to become the ontological analysis required by the dynamic of expression that Merleau-Ponty had in his previous work already identified with the human institutions of painting, writing, and politics.[7] In *The Visible and the Invisible*, as in his previous texts, he organized his argument as a double critique of rationalism and empiricism, for both were, for him, unable to comprehend our intimate and unique

[3] Merleau-Ponty (1997, p. 139).

[4] Ibid., p. 84.

[5] Merleau-Ponty (1998, p. 17).

[6] Merleau-Ponty (2007, p. 334).

[7] In his statement for his candidacy to the Collège de France, Merleau-Ponty presented his research plans for what turned out to be the last decade of his life in the following way: "Communication arouses… The writer's thought does not control his language from without; the writer is himself a kind of new idiom, constructing itself, inventing ways of expression, and diversifying itself according to its own meaning. […] Great prose is the art of capturing a meaning which until then had never been objectified and of rendering it accessible to everyone who speaks the same language… […] Hegel said that the Roman state was the prose of the world. I shall entitle my book *Introduction à la prose du monde*. In this work I shall elaborate the category of prose beyond the confines of literature to give it a sociological meaning." Merleau-Ponty (2000, pp. 8–9).

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inscription in the world. In the latter book, the double critique unfolded as that of naïve rationalism and teleological dialectics, for it was against them that Merleau-Ponty proposed the alternative concepts of *hyper-reflection* and *hyperdialectics*, central to the being flesh of society and political life, as we will soon see.[8] These concepts became particularly crucial to his late praise of parliamentary democracy as the only known regime that welcomes "opposition and freedom"—a formula that would be meant to become the political carrier of an ontological meaning, i.e. of the actual institutional and practical inscription of *hyper-reflection* and *hyperdialectics* in the contemporary flesh of the social.

For Merleau-Ponty, the blind spot that characterized the philosophy of reflection's naïveté was its inability to take into account its own situation, the experience of the plurality of the intersubjective world, and the existence of the other as other. For him, "rationalism" was unable to explain communication and truth, since a "genuine conversation gives me access to thoughts that I did not know myself capable of, that I *was* not capable of, and sometimes I feel myself *followed* in a route unknown to myself which my words, cast back by the other, are in the process of tracing out for me. To suppose here that an *intelligible world* sustains the exchange would be to take a name for a solution…"[9] It is true, however, that the point of view of reflection is right in what it denies—an "exterior relationship between a world in itself and myself."[10] But it "saves us from empiricism" only naively, "turning the incarnate subject into a trascendental subject and reality into ideality."[11] The road of reflection leads to the theoretical reconstruction of the world and to a chronic inability to take into account its own inscription in the intercorporeal and intersubjective space and time, an inscription that turns the "blind spot" into an irreducible element of existence and judgment, and thus of reason and reflection. This inability to take into account its own inscription in—and being part of—the same space that reflection reflects upon, turns the blind spot into a forgetting that leads to the illusions of complete knowledge and final truths. It is against this background that, he concluded, "we are catching sight of the necessity of another operation besides the conversion to reflection, more fundamental than it, of a sort of *hyper-reflection* (*sur-réflexion*) that would also take itself and the changes it introduces into the spectacle into account. [Hyper-reflection must] plunge into the world instead of surveying it,"[12] since it is *in* and *of* it, and thus no longer able to claim for itself the *pensée de suvol* Merleau-Ponty frequently denounced. Hyper-reflection is the reflexive attitude that renounces to the claim of having access to the whole, a theoretical—but also a

[8] A centrality that springs from the fact that, as Diana Coole has recently put it, according to Merleau-Ponty, a "democratic style of politics might be progressive as a new ethos of coexistence." Coole (2007, p. 149). This ethos, however, should not be confused with a moralizing politics. On this, Coole, in distinguishing Merleau-Ponty from postructuralism, says that it was the latter's "ethical turn" that made it unable to "come to grips with politics and intersubjectivity, the fleshy interworld which, as Machiavelli and Weber insisted, is a domain distinct from the moral realm. In any case, Merlau-Ponty's focus was not ultimately on epistemology or ethics, but on ontology, and here, it is the choreography of intermundane (co)existence that he tries to describe" (Ibid., p. 221).

[9] Merleau-Ponty (1997, p. 13).

[10] Ibid., p. 32.

[11] Ibid., p. 29.

[12] Ibid., p. 38.

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practical—attitude that comes to terms with the fact that there is always a chance of not seeing or conceiving from one's own position what others can nonetheless see and conceive from theirs.

This critique of rationalism had its immediate sequel, since in the same way that reflection had to be reintroduced into the field in which it is inscribed and to which it belongs in order to become hyper-reflection, the same operation needs to be performeed regarding the "dialectical" unfolding of time. For Merleau-Ponty, both *field* and *time* were notions that implied spacial and historical openness, since "time is the model of these symbolic matrices, which are openness upon being" and, at the same time, "the world is a field, [and] as such is always open."[13] This is why, in order to introduce the dimension of openness in the unfolding of time, Merleau-Ponty briefly revisited, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, his critique of the Marxist dialectic already outlined—and that we will further discuss later in the paper—in his previous *Adventures of the Dialectic*,[14] asserting that "there is no good dialectic but that which criticizes itself and surpasses itself."[15] Or, as he puts it again in *The Visible and the Invisible*, in this way "Being [thus] becomes a system with several entries. Hence it cannot be contemplated from without and in simultaneity, but must be effectively traversed…"[16] For him, in short, a "good dialectic" was one that should be called "hyperdialectic…a thought…capable of reaching truth because it envisages without restriction the plurality of relationships and what has been called ambiguity."[17] For Merleau-Ponty, these two critical insights became, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, the pillars of the enigma and opacity involved in the reversibility of the being of flesh, in the ambiguity proper to being visible-seers, touching-touchables, that is the being of bodies, languages, and "body politics" alike.

The element of flesh, the flesh of the body as much as the flesh of the social and the flesh of language, together with the inscription of the flesh in the flesh—i.e. of speaking and acting bodies, carnal beings, in the flesh of society—must be understood as sharing the ontological characteristics of hyper-reflection and hyperdialectics. Flesh, being the element of both the inter-corporeal and the corporeal at once, of the "subjective" expression and its intersubjective space of co-perception, creates temporal dynamics and spatial fields in which the fold and reversibility of being flesh and the beings of flesh constitute the texture of the social as such. This texture is a texture of layers and chiasms, of thinking-speakers and speaking-thoughts, of inter-corporeal relations of reversible, two-dimensional visible-seers and touchable-touchers, of spaces of the visible and the speakable that, in their very existence and co-existence, constitute the blind-spots and the fields of the invisible and the unspeakable. In short: "this swarming of words behind words, thoughts behind thoughts—this universal substitution is also a kind of

[13] Ibid., p. 173 and 185. And also, in his course notes *Institution and Passivity*, he says: "Time is the very model of institution: passivity-activity, it continues, because it has been instituted, it fuses, it cannot stop being, it is total because it is partial, it is a field." Merleau-Ponty (2010, p. 7).

[14] Merleau-Ponty (1995).

[15] Merleau-Ponty (1995, p. 94).

[16] Merleau-Ponty (1997, p. 90).

[17] Merleau-Ponty (1997, p. 38).

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stability."[18] And this "kind of stability" is a field and a temporality, a style of being flesh in which carnal beings inscribe in their very practices the types of "incarnated principles" that Merleau-Ponty called hyper-reflection and hyperdialectics, an "unstable equilibrium," as he puts it elsewhere, that very well may be, in short, "the *regime* we must look for."[19]

Merleau-Ponty's use of the notion of *regime* anticipates Claude Lefort's cherished understanding of *forms of society.*[20] A regime, for both Merleau-Ponty and Lefort, was a given form of the flesh of the social, a given style of collective existence in which this "kind of stability," this open, relational space of carnal bodies that is flesh and that is society, could be said to last and to shape, to stage and to perceive, to make sense and to interpret itself and its parts. In his unfinished text, Merleau-Ponty refereed to language as that "lightest" manifestation of flesh. "As my body, which is one of the visibles, sees itself also and thereby makes itself the natural light opening its own interior to the visible…so also speech…[is] the organ and the resonator of all the other regions of signification and consequently coextensive with the thinkable."[21] For him, *thinking language* and *speaking thought* were indistinguishable and their logic was a prototype of the "fundamental problem"[22] of sedimentation and reactivation, the problem of speaking and spoken speech,[23] in short, the problem of "institution" understood also as a being of two folds, as a reversible entity in which both the *instituting* and the *instituted* dimensions characteristic of the element of flesh make their appearance. It is along theses lines that the problem of institution became central to Merleau-Ponty's late work.[24] As Lefort summarizes it in the Foreword to Merleau-Ponty's course notes on *Institution and Passivity*,

> [Merleau-Ponty] takes [the term "institution"] in its double sense—the action that provides a beginning and a state of the thing established, for example, the state of being social, political, or juridical—but with this essential difference, that institution as foundation is not considered as the product of an act and that institutions as establishment contains at the same time the possibility of its

[18] Merleau-Ponty (1998, p. 20).

[19] Merleau-Ponty (1995, p. 207) My italics.

[20] Lefort (Lefort 1988).

[21] Merleau-Ponty (1998, p. 118).

[22] Merleau-Ponty (1997, p. 259).

[23] In the Foreword to the English edition to Merleau-Ponty's *Course Notes: Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*, one of the last courses taught by him before his unexpected death, Leonard Lawlor insists that this vocabulary, originally introduced in *Phenomenology of Perception*, remains central to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of speech and language in his late work: "In the Course Notes, Merleau-Ponty indeed defines speech in terms of the dative, as 'speaking to' (BN 40). He defines speech in this way because he is trying to understand language that is not 'ready-made' but language 'in the making.' Here, of course, Merleau-Ponty, is utilizing a distinction that he developed in earlier works: the well-known distinction between 'speaking speech' and 'spoken speech.'" See Lawlor (2002, p. xxviii).

[24] In his *Themes from the Lectures*, for example, he states: "What we understand by the concept of institution are those events in experience which endow it with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will acquire meaning, will form an intelligible series or history—or again, those events which sediment in me a meaning, not just as survivals or residues, but as the invitation to a sequel…" Merleau-Ponty (1970, pp. 40–41).

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> perpetuation, by means of repetition, indeed, the possibility of its petrification as well as the possibility of the reactivation of the instituting force. […] Merleau-Ponty distinguishes immediately the problematic of institution from that of constitution (in the Kantian sense). He rejects, along with the idea of constituting consciousness, that of a world in which nothing would be discovered that had not been constituted with its operations. Understood in this double sense, institution presupposes a non-coincidence between the institutor and the instituted. This is what makes him say that time is the model of institution. If institution is *openness to*, openness to is always produced *on the basis of*.[25]

The flesh of language and the flesh of society are of this order, the order of institution, they are *openness to* as much as they are produced *on the basis of,* they are self-driven, hyperdialectic, unstable equilibriums, they "must be understood neither synchronically nor diachronically but as [systems] in the making."[26] This "in the making" is what Merleau-Ponty elsewhere called a "dynamic of advents": events in life, language, art, and politics that open up a future, that are a promise of further events. *Advent* became, in some of his writings, the central concept of the dynamic of institution that Merleau-Ponty attributed to language, society, and to the entirety of human culture. He borrowed the concept from Paul Ricoeur—and it was precisely the latter who has insisted that Merleau-Ponty's "formulae themselves contain an entire conception of action, and even an entire politics."[27]

What is this entire politics that Ricoeur attributes to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of institution and the dynamic of advents? Let me begin to give an answer to this question—that will be addressed more broadly in the next section of the paper—by making an important clarification. Some of these preliminary reflections, having dealt with flesh and with bodies, with incarnate principles such as hyperdialectics and hyperreflection, could have given the misleading impression that, for Merleau-Ponty, communication was only face-to-face communication, that the expressive gesture could only produce effects in an immediate space of co-presence, in a face-to-face human interaction. Merleau-Ponty's theory of expression, speech, and action, however, applies to face-to-face as much as to distant or mediated communication. For him, the distinction between these forms of communication was not altogether easy to make, since there is always a *chiasm* that separates *and* unites any human interaction in such a way that—when the expression is successful—the "amount" of distance is ignored *as medium*. Communication is always at-a-distance. Vision is always tele-vision. There is always a chiasm, first in the body itself, between the body as seer and the body as visible, and this chiasm operates in the same fashion in all carnal beings and in the intercorporality of the world. The chiasm is at the same time separation *and* union in both face-to-face interaction and in mediated communication.

[25] Lefort (2010, pp. x–xi).

[26] Low (2000, p. 101).

[27] Paul Ricoeur (2009, p. 19).

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As Francoise Dastur has recently put it, "for Merleau-Ponty communication constitutes an 'enchantment' or a sort of possession… both the listener and the speaker are immersed in the presence of a meaning that is everywhere, but that is nowhere posited in itself."[28] And this enchantment could and does stretch over indeterminate distances. It is in this manner that somebody's expressive style—an artist, a writer, a political actor, any-body—becomes comprehensible to us in such a way that the *distance becomes milieu.* This phenomenon is suggestively portrayed in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of Stendhal's use of language:

> I get closer and closer to him, until in the end I read his words with the very same intention that he gave to them. […] I create Stendhal; I am Stendhal while reading him. But that is because first he knew how to bring me to dwell within him. The reader's sovereignty is only imaginary, since he draws all his force from the infernal machine called the book, the apparatus for making significations. […] The expressive moment occurs where the relationship reverses itself, where the book takes possession of the reader.[29]

Indeed all human communication, for Merleau-Ponty, "is an encounter between the glorious and impalpable incarnations of my own speech and the author's speech."[30] This encounter—isomorphic to the realms of literature, art, or politics—when communicatively successful, tends to blur the hierarchy between speaker and listener, between actor and spectator, since "when I speak to another person and listen to him, what I understand begins to insert itself in the intervals between my saying things, my speech is intersected laterally by the other's speech, and I hear myself in him, while he speaks in me."[31]

The truth is that we are still only starting to grasp how is it that "these formulae… contain an entire conception of action, and even an entire politics." Although Stendhal's discursive interaction between writer and reader, between speaker and listener, is indeed *inter-action,* we still need to make explicit the way in which this understanding of the being flesh of the social, and of this being flesh of both speaking actors and the language they themselves speak, implies an entire politics. This communication in which distance becomes milieu applies equally to the experience of the political actor who spontaneously responds to what Merleau-Ponty describes, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, as a "certain lack," (Merleau-Ponty 2008, p. 213) an intersubjective, intercorporeal lack that is (co)experienced when there is a shared—but also the personal—feeling that something is in need to be done or said. "The happy writer and the speaking man…do not wonder, before speaking, whether speech is possible. […] Their thought germinates in speech and, without seeking it, they are understood, making themselves other, while saying what is most singular to them. They truly abide in themselves, without feeling exiled from the other. And because they are fully convinced that what seems evident to them is true, they say it

[28] Dastur (2009, p. 263).

[29] Merleau-Ponty (1973, pp. 12–13).

[30] Ibid., p. 14.

[31] Ibid., p. 142.

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quite simply."[32] As we will soon se, these lines, containing the seed of "an entire politics," outline a normative ground from where contemporary democratic politics may be understood—and also criticized in its lack.

3 An entire politics

Merleau-Ponty was fundamentally an aesthetic theorist and a philosopher. His political thought spent a significant period of time trapped in his militant commitment to Marxism and that delayed the task of developing a complete position consistent with his philosophical writings.[33] However, the political productivity of his philosophy started to appear clear to him in two of his late works[34] and, to some of his interpreters—particularly to Claude Lefort,[35]—in almost all their Merleau-Ponty-inspired political philosophy. I will thus now outline the main elements of Merleau-Ponty's late political thought, attempting to put us in a better position to fully grasp his entire politics. I will do it by drafting those central elements of Merleau-Ponty's works that explicitly approached political action and modern democratic politics.[36] With this in mind, I will first analyze "A Note on Machiavelli",[37] an essay from the forties that was later included, in 1960, in *Signs*, and, second, I will show how, as I have already briefly anticipated, in his 1955 *Adventures of the Dialectic* Merleau-Ponty arrived at the conclusion that parliamentary democracy could be regarded as the only modern political regime that institutionally and practically welcomes the "opposition and freedom"[38] that he ontologically linked to the hyperdialectical and hyperreflective characteristics of the flesh of the social.

Merleau-Ponty, in his interpretation of Machiavelli's thought, explicitly shows his understanding of political action and the entirety of a politics such as the one suggested by Ricoeur. Allow me to quote him quite extensively here:

[32] Ibid., p. 145.

[33] His first political notions found their main expression in *Humanism and Terror*. For his rejection of some of the assumptions driving this text, see *Adventures of the Dialectic*, "Epilogue".

[34] Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic* and *Signs*.

[35] See "The Question of Democracy" in *Democracy and Political Theory* and his prefaces to *The Prose of the World* and *The Visible and the Invisible*, and Claude Lefort, *Sur une colonne absente. Ecrits autour de Merleau-Ponty*.

[36] And although I am in agreement with Diana Coole when she says that Merleau-Ponty did not "advocate any universally desirable set of institutional arrangements or political principles," I want to nonetheless suggest that in the works I am about to discuss, political action and parliamentary democracy did become the center of the dynamic of self-institution characteristic of the flesh of the social—the "auto-schematizing", as Merleau-Ponty also puts it, central to the institution of society. See Coole, p. 14.

[37] Merleau-Ponty (1998, pp. 211–223).

[38] As Coole puts it, despite his "recognition of radical contingency, accidents, and violence in history, Merleau-Ponty does not then emphasize singularity and the aleatory to the same degree as Foucault (or Deleuze) and his project is not only deconstructive. He inclines rather to the Machiavellian formula whereby *fortuna* governs half our lives and remains susceptible to interpretive and practical virtuosity." Coole (2007, p. 116).

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> What sometimes transforms softness into cruelty and harshness into value, and overturns the precepts of private life, is that acts of power intervene in a certain state of opinion which changes their meaning. They awake an echo which is at times immeasurable. They open or close hidden fissures in the block of general consent, and trigger a molecular process which may modify the whole course of events. Or as mirrors set around in a circle transform a slender flame into a fairyland, acts of power reflected in the constellation of consciousnesses are transfigured, and the reflections of these reflections create an appearance which is the proper place—the truth, in short—of historical action. […] Machiavelli writes expressly: 'A prince should try to fashion for himself a reputation for goodness, clemency, piety, loyalty, and justice; *furthermore, he should have all these good qualities*…' […] Machiavelli says the prince should have the qualities he seems to have but, he concludes, 'remain sufficiently master of himself to show their contraries when it is expedient to do so.' A political precept, but one which could well be the rule for a true morality as well. For public judgment in terms of appearances, which converts the prince's goodness into weakness, is perhaps not so false. What is a goodness incapable of harshness? What is a goodness which wants to be goodness? A meek way of ignoring others and ultimately despising them. [He] tries to define a political *virtue*… [a] real spiritual strength, since it is a question of steering a way between the will to please and defiance, between self-satisfied goodness and cruelty, and conceiving of an historical understanding all may adhere to. […] Through mastery of his relationships with others, the man in power clears away obstacles between man and man and puts a little daylight in our relationships—as if men could be close to one another only at a sort of distance.[39]

In a way, this long quotation says it all.[40] Merleau-Ponty's notion of political action and inter-action, his understanding of politics in general, integrates all the aforementioned features. First, he insists on the "expressive" character of political action, claiming for political action all the properties he elsewhere attributes to expression in general, embodied in the practices of speaking language and creative arts in particular. As with both speech and art, this expressive character is not mere subjectivism, since it is the instituting action of a carnal being in the context of a field that is itself flesh of the social flesh. There is no *fecund* action, the quoted fragment suggests, that does not manage to change not only the actor's presentation before others and him or herself, but also the constellation of intersubjectively shared meanings in which it is inscribed. Actors introduce change and change themselves, shape and shape themselves, are both activity and passivity, emission and reception at once, since they "intervene in a certain state of opinion which changes their meaning" and "open or close hidden fissures in the block of general consent." The political actor acts in such a way that his or her personal—or even

[39] Merleau-Ponty (1998, pp. 216–218). Merleau-Ponty's emphasis. Translation modified.

[40] In his *Merleau-Ponty Vivant*, Jean Paul Sartre, referring to Merleau-Ponty's essay *Eye and Mind*, says that it "says it all, provided one can decipher it." I make the same claim for this fragment of "A Note on Machiavelli" regarding Merleau-Ponty's political thought. See Sartre (1998, pp. 565–626).

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collective, if we are talking of a collective actor—style appears in open display, since it is as a consequence of such appearing that the inter-corporeal field of other actors and reactions, visions and perceptions, will constitute the ultimate meaning—the reality—of political existence.

This style, this display and appearing, should contribute to configure a state of opinion in which "goodness" does not become "weakness." "What is a goodness which wants to be goodness?" Merleau-Ponty asks. And he answers without hesitation: "A meek way of ignoring others and ultimately despising them." Wanting to be goodness, wanting to appear as such before the others' gaze without regard for what is actually being done and why it is being done, without fully committing to the inner principle of the action and its consequences in the world, does nothing but despise those others whose fellowship politics requires. Political actors obsessed with being and appearing good will do nothing but betray the trust of their co-citizens, because the latter trusted the former out of the "expressive" agreement between their own judgment and that of the public—and not because of a submissive attempt to please either the public's or their own subjective idea of the good. In sum, Merleau-Ponty's political speech is Machiavelli's *virtù*—and this virtue is not that of withdrawing from the uncertainties and risks of action in order to remain consistently "good" but that of engaging in the struggle of politics in order to institute the meanings that the time demands.

Machiavellian virtue might seem too "instrumental" to some, since it does set goals and does consider the means necessary for them, but this could appear so only if we ignore the realm of meaning and sedimentation, of instituting and instituted fields, in short, the hyper-reflective and hyperdialectical dimensions of politics that is to political actors "like water is to fish." Only forgetting that the "goals" and "means" of politics are communicative, that are both attainable and implementable only in dialogue, debate, and symbolic struggle with the others, only forgetting politics' "milieu," the milieu of meaning and the genesis of meaning, can we ignore its centrality to the understanding of action and the understanding of democratic politics—because, as Merleau-Ponty also says, "it is this virtue and not success which Machiavelli takes as a sign of political worth," the virtue of *making* sense and not of surrendering to a supposedly pre-existent, rational sense. It is precisely because this dynamic is analogous to that of flesh and institution that this virtue of acting politically is, moreover, an indirect task, a process that could neither be completely controlled nor fully surrendered under the surveilling gaze of a reason ignorant of its own blind spots. It is, in short, "as if men could be close to one another only at a sort of distance," because the distance between circumstantial actors and spectators comes from institutionally and practically rejecting both the expectation of a complete agreement and, inversely, the "decisionist" obliviousness to the dynamic of meaning and meaning formation that makes decisions collectively acceptable. It is as if each time we try to close the enigma of communication, meaning, and power, as both rationalists and decisionists do, we end up just removing ourselves from the problem we are trying to grasp, instead of embracing politics in its uncertain but nonetheless communicative—i.e. expressive and institutive—character. "What is original about Machiavelli," Merleau-Ponty adds later in the same text, "is that, having laid down the source of struggle, he goes

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beyond it without ever forgetting it. He finds something other than antagonism in struggle itself. […] We are far from the relationships of sheer force that hold between objects. To use Machiavelli's words, we have gone from 'beasts' to 'man.' […] Power is not naked force, but neither is it the honest delegation of individual wills, as if the latter were able to set aside their differences."[41] Meaning springs from man's—not beast's—struggle, but it springs from struggle nonetheless. And this meaning is indirect and uncertain because each action that means "right" for many means "wrong" for others and even sheer immorality for a few more. However, all occurs in the human world of significations; the world of hyper-reflexive reasons and hyperdialectical values; the world of fields of forces and sedimented practices; the world of the instituting and instituted dimensions of society. What Merleau-Ponty is saying, in short, is that "Machiavelli introduces us to the milieu proper to politics."[42]

What kind of politics, however, is the one Machiavelli is introducing us to? Is it to any politics, to a revolutionary politics attached to the formula of "a 'no' which is a 'yes'"—the philosophical formula of the revolution, as he puts it in the Preface to *Signs*—or is it to a politics sensitive to the folds and fields of the flesh of the social, a politics that understands that *institution* is not *constitution* and that *instituting* is not *constituting*? In truth, there is little doubt as to what politics Merleau-Ponty's Machiavelli introduces us to: it is to a politics that is not that of the revolutionary (the stage of "no") and dictatorial (the stage of "yes") party, it is to a politics that is not that of total contestation that mutates into that of total affirmation once in power, it is to a hyper-reflexive and hyperdialectical politics that renounces to the certainty of total vision and knowledge of the field of the social and a politics that renounces to the certainty to the total foresight and predictive knowledge of the unfolding of historical time. Thus understood, Machiavelli's politics is a politics in which a "perpetual movement of languages where past, present, and future are mixed [and] no rigorous break is possible."[43]

As I suggested, "A Note on Machiavelli" says it all. I must still analyze, however, the way in which this general understanding of politics found its final elaboration in Merleau-Ponty's late thought, since it is here that Machivelli's politics becomes democratic politics—and it is here that democratic politics becomes Merleau-Pontyan politics, with all the critical and ontological implications thus involved. I will therefore now show the way in which these insights acquired a more comprehensive version in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Merleau-Ponty's most explicitly political work, since it is here that Merleau-Ponty attempts a massive revision of post-Marxian philosophy of history and its overall failure to recognize the contingency and unpredictability—the hyper-reflexive and hyperdialectical character—of political action, while, at the same time, keeping in mind its grounded, embodied, and sedimented character. In this work, democratic politics—or what he calls "parliamentary democracy"—becomes the actual attempt at institutionalizing and embracing the flesh of the social.

[41] Ibid., p. 212.

[42] Ibid., p. 214.

[43] Ibid., p. 39.

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The "adventures" of the dialectic are the adventures of a Marxist dialectic that assumes the possibility of transcending the dichotomy subject/object through the action of the proletariat—the object of capitalism—in its becoming the subject of history. However, both the historical and theoretical "solutions"—the praxis of Marxism—to this problem have failed to achieve this goal. The cases Merleau-Ponty chooses in order to show this failure are those of Lenin, Trotsky, Sartre, and Luckács. Lenin, by assuming that only the Party could give shape to the proletarians' will, ended up creating an intellectual elite that claimed total knowledge. This was, according to Merleau-Ponty, nothing more than a radical subjectivism of the party. Trotsky, on the other hand, finding himself confronted with the party-of-Lenin-under-the-direction-of-Stalin, preferred, first, not to struggle from a minority position; and, second, to go into exile and then trust in the spontaneity of the masses. This alternative, of course, did not fair any better than Lenin's subjectivism of the Party, since his approach assumed an equally abstract objectivism of the proletariat.[44]

The longest analysis in the book is devoted to Sartre, whose "ultrabolshevism" was basically a voluntaristic, extemporaneous Leninism, asking for an unconditional and unjustified—after Stalinism and Korea, and later Budapest—acceptance of the Party's leadership. Nobody can fail to see that the central purpose of the entire book was, indeed, engaging Sartre, confronting Sartre's flight forward before the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Communist project as emancipatory models, with a complete revision of the ontological basis for the politics that the times demanded. This ontological basis is found, again, in the rejection of the paradigm of the Kantian *constituting* subject and the embracement of a new paradigm of *instituting* practices that remain open to contestation and no longer expect to redo the world from scratch. It was thus Sartre's gaze of the Party—"nothingness"—the *rationalist constituting* of the proletariat that was confronted with *the expressive instituting* Merleau-Ponty associated to political action and the dynamics of "parliamentary democracy."

Sartre sides with communism based on his own principles, which are different from the Communists' principles themselves. He rejects the spontaneity of an objective dialectic immanent to society—that "second nature" of Lukács—and, says Merleau-Ponty,

> founds communist action precisely by refusing any productivity to history and by making history, insofar as it is intelligible, the immediate result of our volitions. As for the rest, it is impenetrable opacity. To be sure, this extreme subjectivism and this extreme objectivism have something in common: if the social is a second nature, it can be modified, like the other, only by a technician, in this case a sort of political engineer. And if the social is only the inert and confused residue of past actions, one can intervene and put it in order only by pure creation. Whether it be in the name of a theoretical knowledge

[44] It is on this point that Merleau-Ponty criticizes even Lefort, who in those years went further than Trotsky in his belief in the ineluctability of the proletarian's fate. To Merleau-Ponty, Lefort became Trotsky's Trotsky—Lefort himself would later recognize his inability to relinquish his trust in the proletarian's role in history in his early writings.

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> which the Party alone possesses or in the name of an absolute nonknowledge, the Party's action is not subject to the criteria of meaning. The philosophy of pure object and the philosophy of pure subject are equally terroristic, but they agree only about the consequences. As for the motives, these remain in a position of rivalry. The ruin of the dialectic is accomplished openly with Sartre and clandestinely with the communists, and the same decisions that the communists base on the historical process and on the historical mission of the proletariat Sartre bases on the nonbeing of the proletariat and the decision which, out of nothing, creates the proletariat as the subject of history.[45]

According to Meleau-Ponty, Sartre sustains that the proletariat has no existence before the party creates them ex-nihilo. There is a sort of Hobbesean or even Schmittean theory of the party in Sartre:

> It should not be said that [the Party] expresses the proletariat *because* the militants elect the leadership or even *because* they tacitly approve it. It has an eternal and total mandate from the single fact that without it there would be no proletariat… any decision is, by nominal definition, 'unanimous.' This regime without secret ballot, without a minority, without an opposition, calls itself 'real' democracy… because it creates out of nothing the power of the powerless, an enormous undertaking which cannot afford contestation."[46]

What leads to Merleau-Ponty's contrasting idea of politics and action:

> If there is action, it is necessary to elicit information, facts, a discussion, arguments, a preference given to this rather than that—in short, the probable, which Sartre does not want because he looks at it as a pure rationalist and sees it as a lesser certitude… the probable is another name for the real, it is the modality of what exists… There is no action worthy of the name which is 'pure action.' Pure action, the 'unanimous' Party, are the action and the Party seen from outside; and if Sartre entered within, he, like everyone else, could no more abstain from discussing than from breathing. Ultimately, pure action is either suicide or murder.[47]

In Merleau-Ponty's view, political action is never pure, expression is never constituent, dialectical movement never gets any closer to the end of history nor can expect to introduce in reality a passionately willed or philosophically imagined order that does not spring from the clash of opinions and forces, traditions and expressions, structures and practices within the very flesh of the social it wants to transform. There is no answer to the question of what comes from things and what comes from agency, of what is already there and what is pure addition. Our only certainty is that neither side of the equation does without the other. This irreducibility of *institution*, of the ineradicably intertwined instituting and instituted

[45] Merleau-Ponty (1995, pp. 97–98).

[46] Ibid., pp. 109–110. In a footnote included in the page of the text, Sartre says: "It is true that the C.P. is nothing outside of the class; but let it disappear, and the working class falls back into dust particles".

[47] Ibid., pp. 116–118. Sartre never offers any alternative to this other than "'concessions, accommodations, compromises,' or perhaps, when they are not possible, pure action, which is to say, force" p. 122.

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dimensions of flesh, extends to the question of representation and power, to the meaning of the very definition of the people or the proletariat and its collective actors or "its" Party. For Sartre, on the other hand, "between the proletariat and the militants, between the militant and his leaders… there is literally an identification. …in obeying the leader, it is one's own better self that one obeys. Undoubtedly this principle brings back painful memories… When men wish to create things *ex nihilo*, then the supernatural appears."[48]

Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly investigate the Schmittean, quasi-theologico-political implications of his critique of Sartre's radical decisionism. He does, however, fully understand the consequences of a Marxism that contingency forced to abandon the claim to total objective knowledge, without for that reason having given up the will to making real its "philosophical" truth. Under these conditions, "the assurance of being the carrier of truth is vertiginous. It is in itself violence. How can I know what God wants unless I try it out, asked Coufontaine? If I succeed, it is because God was with me. In the same way, the Bolshevik in power, assailed as he is by contingencies…is assured of acting according to truth only if he succeeds: it was then permitted by things and by the ineluctable truth of socialism. […] Such are the poisoned fruits of *willed truth*: it authorizes one to go ahead against all appearances; in itself it is madness."[49] Merleau-Ponty's critique of Sartre's constituent, revolutionary voluntarism was a form of engaging in a subtle—and sometimes not so subtle—game of contrasts in which a form of action, a type of regime, "an entire politics" indeed emerges. In his reading of Machiavelli, Merleau-Ponty had found an understanding of political life that "puts a little light in our relationships" and that could be even said to be "a true morality." In his reading of Sartre, on the other hand, he finds a politics that cannot be embraced and, in his rejection of it, begins to discover "what is not acceptable to us"[50] and what may very well be instead.

4 Flesh and plurality

Not all forms of Marxist dialectic were equally wrong, however, since Luckács' approach was different. Still, the problem with the latter was that it had been proved wrong by history, both personally—he himself ended up "recognizing" his mistakes—and empirically. It was proved wrong empirically because the mediation of the proletarian and the Party—the "chiasm" of the "free exchange among thinking, speaking men"—was overwhelmed by the Party's monopoly of historical knowledge. In the end, Merleau-Ponty concludes, we should admit that "the proletariat and revolutionary society as [Luckács conceived] them are indeed ideas without historical equivalency."[51] However, the lessons Luckács had learned from

[48] Ibid., p. 151.

[49] Ibid., pp. 129–130.

[50] Ibid., p. 3.

[51] Merleau-Ponty (1995, p. 204).

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his teacher—Weber—were actually the path to follow, since they had already shown a "better" dialectic than that of Marxism.

According to Merleau-Ponty, Weber's dialectic was "brand new" because his non-universalistic liberalism "does not ingenuously consider itself to be the law of things; rather it perseveres in becoming such a law, through a history in which it is not predestined."[52] Weber understood that history implies plurality and contingency, that it is "other people," as Merleau-Ponty puts it in his lecture on the "Primacy of Perception."[53] Weber was indeed a fundamental inspiration for Merleau-Ponty's hyperdialectic and hyper-reflection, since "there is no attitude more respectful, no objectivity more profound, than [Weber's] claim of going to the very source of history. History is not an external god, a hidden reason of which we have only to record the conclusions. It is the metaphysical fact that the same life, our own, is played out both within us and outside us, in our present and in our past, and that the world is a system with several points of access, or, one might say, that we have fellow men."[54] In his analysis of Franklin's work ethic and the spirit of capitalism, we can already see the depth of Weber's "better dialectic," since "an economic system is, as he says, a cosmos, a human choice become a situation… History has meaning, but there is no pure development of ideas. Its meaning arises in contact with contingency, at the moment when human initiative founds a system of life by taking up anew scattered givens."[55]

Weber's deep understanding of history and politics was shown in his ability to grasp what Merleau-Ponty described as the instituting and instituted dimensions of collective existence: "These intelligible nuclei of history… where man and the givens of nature or of the past meet, arising as symbolic matrices which have no pre-existence and which can, for a longer or a shorter time, influence history itself and then disappear, not by external forces but through an internal disintegration or because one of their secondary elements becomes predominant and changes their nature."[56] Weber leaves behind the limits of those dialectics that aim at final closure—he was not a revolutionary. For him "revolution [was] essentially a military dictatorship…a carnival of intellectuals dressed up as politicians."[57] Weber was a liberal whose liberalism was *heroic* because he knew that a democratic polity—a hyper-reflexive and hyperdialectical regime—is a human possibility that can be, and even deserves to be, instituted rather than a rational truth that must be proved. Merleau-Ponty does use the word *libéral*, which, in the French context, does not of course mean "social-democrat" as it generally would in the U.S., although it did not mean at the time what it means in Europe today either (economic liberalism.) Merleau-Ponty's enigmatic use of the notion signals rather in the direction of a liberal *régime*, something probably closer to what we would identify today with the idea of liberal democracy.

[52] Ibid., p. 9.

[53] Merleau-Ponty (2000).

[54] Ibid., p. 22.

[55] Ibid., p. 16.

[56] Ibid., p. 17.

[57] Ibid., p. 25.

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"Sartre once said that the Party itself has a history. Yes, and to speak like Max Weber… it is the history of the Party's efforts to utilize the ebb and flow that are the respiration of the class and of the entire society… It is therefore essential for the Party to include this plurality or this inertia which Sartre refuses it and which is its flesh…"[58] Merleau-Ponty indeed saw in Weber, in his "ebb and flow," in his theorizing of the back and forward of conflict and plurality in modern society, the sociological understanding of the texture and tissue of society he chose to call flesh. In the context of Weber's ebb and flow of society, it was not "reason" but a secularized, originally religious charisma that carried the burden of political action in the context of plurality. Following Rousseau on the *charismatic* need to "compel without violence and persuade without convincing", Weber suggested that this formula should be criticized in its temporal rather than in its strictly charismatic aspect, since Rousseau's position implied the utopian dream of a rational agreement of the will of all with the general will that would, eventually, render charismatic leadership unnecessary. Against Rousseau, Weber saw in the *instituting* power of a democratized charisma the only hope to counterbalance the modern disenchantment of the world. Charismatic leadership was, for Weber, still "extra-ordinary"—expressive in Merleau-Ponty's words—the speaking rather than the spoken moment of political speech. Charismatic leadership was, for Weber, a *revolutionary, constituting* force in pre-modern contexts, but becomes the *democratic, instituting* force in what both Weber and Merleau-Ponty described in terms of parliamentary democracy. In pre-modern times, the "dialectic" between charisma and tradition monopolized the logic of continuity and discontinuity. In modern times, it is the dialectic between the democratic charisma of the parliamentary leader on the one hand, and the legal system on the other, that ought to keep in place the "kind of stability" that is the flesh of the democratic regime.

Of course, other readings of Weber fundamentally disagree with Merleau-Ponty's interpretation—and this disagreement is extremely useful in throwing light on the specificities of the latter understanding of the plurality of the flesh of society in general and of democracy in particular. Habermas's reading of Weber, for example, implied that the latter's move from pre-modern to modern types of legitimate domination displaced the "conservative" dimension of legitimacy from the *traditional* to the *legal-rational*. However, in this move from pre-modern to modern societies, Weber also introduced a second modification that is not sufficiently considered by Habermas. The second fundamental change experienced with the advent of modernity was the aforementioned *democratization* of charisma. In democratic charisma, the emphasis moved from *attributes* supposedly belonging to the *prophet* in pre-modern times to the *agreement* the political actor manages to obtain from parts—though not all—of the plural public in modern democracies. Habermas's move regarding pre-modern and modern legitimacy is of a different type. While Weber underlines the novelty of a dynamic between democratic charisma and legal-rational legitimacy, Habermas simply assumes that only rationality in its twofold character (teleological and communicative) replaces both traditional and charismatic legitimacies in modern times—in short, that communicative rationality replaces charisma as the

[58] Ibid., p. 120.

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constituting—as opposed to Merleau-Ponty's *instituting*/Weber's *democratic*—type of legitimacy. It is true that Weber was pessimistic about the rationalizing and bureaucratizing tendencies of modernity. It is also true, however, that that was precisely the reason why he placed his hope in the vital role of the parliamentary and party leader of modern democracy—i.e. because he saw in them the democratic, secularized charisma that could somehow mitigate the process of disenchantment by *instituting* renewed dimensions of meaning into the life of modern societies.

On the other hand—going back again to Habermas—when he excludes the perlocutionary from his notion of communicative action, as he did in his *Theory of Communicative Action* and elsewhere, it could even be said that he is removing the Weberian ethic of responsibility from the political sphere—an ethic of crucial relevance in the Merleau-Pontyan understanding of democratic politics. From Merleau-Ponty's perspective, the end of public speech in the political sphere cannot possibly be agreement and only agreement—although it can neither be reduced to the logic of the system in Habermas' sense. In a democratic polity, disagreement and opposition, struggle and conflicting understandings, should be assumed to be permanent facts. Societies institutionalize electoral and decision-making processes when they have assumed that the change of opinions is a *permanent datum* of the flesh of democracy and because, if the moment of decision were not periodically fixed, we would expect societies to continue either permanently deliberating—if our side is in the minority—or make binding decisions at any time—if our side happens to coincide with the circumstantial majority of opinions. Societies do not make democratic decisions without waiting for all to agree out of "practical" considerations.[59] They make them because there is a hyper-reflexive assumption that there is no such a thing as "agreement of all"[60] in modern democracies.[61] In democratic politics a majority suffices. The straightforward standard of combining *debating* with *voting* in the complex intermingling of the variety of existent democratic procedures is reflectively higher—it is hyper-reflexive—than the one implied in Habermas's theory of communicative action. Democratic political speech, as it is understood by Merleau-Ponty, speaks to all but only aims at convincing the many—and just outnumber the rest. The ethic of responsibility that is behind hyperdialectical and hyper-reflexive institutions cannot be reduced to the categories of instrumental or strategic action. Democratic political action is fundamentally

[59] In contrast, Habermas does underline that it is only the "pressure to decide"—as opposed to Merleau-Ponty's ontological condition of pluralism—that makes majority decisions acceptable. See Habermas (1999b).

[60] In *Between Facts and Norms*, for example, Habermas insists that a valid utterance "should be able to gain the rationally motivated agreement of the interpretating community *as a whole*." Habermas (1999a, p. 14). Emphasis added. Or, later in the same text, he says that "majority rule retains *an internal relation to the search for truth* inasmuch as the decision reached by the majority *only* represents a caesure in an ongoing discussion…. To be sure, majority decisions on questions that have been treated discursively certainly do not draw their legitimating force from the changeability of majority proportions per se." Ibid., p. 179. Emphasis added. And Merleau-Ponty's and my point is that yes, they do draw their legitimacy from the changeability of majority proportions per se—i.e. from their hyperdialectic character.

[61] As Rehg and Bohman put it: "[The] fact of pluralism is what makes majority rule necessary to conclude deliberation." See Rehg and Bohman (2002, p. 40).

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communicative in the sense that its central characteristic is to try to institute a constellation of meanings and values of a new type—or to reproduce a constellation of meanings and values prevailing in a certain status quo—not to merely engage in a narrowly defined teleological action. Coole puts it clearly when she claims that "[as] a consequence of his position, Merleau-Ponty rarely focuses on the more procedural aspects of political systems or on the more formal, normative requirements of deliberation. For him it is more important to analyze the upsurge of cooperation and discontent that animates political life and to appreciate that negotiating the field of power relations requires risk, creativity, and audacity as crucial supplements to reasoned argument and reflection."[62]

For Merleau-Ponty, to speak or to act in the political realm is not to mediate between pre-existing interests or even meanings and policies in such a way that some kind of rational undistorted influence of interests—or an aggregation of them—could be achieved in public policies. To speak and act in democratic politics is, rather, to *become aware*—or, even better, to participate in the *coming to being*—of interests and meanings by giving them an actual, intersubjective existence in the flesh of society. The political actor realizes what language realizes: "by breaking the silence, [it accomplishes] what the silence wished and did not obtain."[63] Political action and speech are the explicit agents of the self-shaping flesh of the social, not a mediating mechanism between processes of meaning formation and communication that suposedly should take place elsewhere. In the same way that, as Paul Klee once said, the line in modern painting "no longer imitates the visible; it 'renders' visible,"[64] speech in general—and democratic political action and speech in particular—do not "represent" in the sense of merely presenting an already existent meaning in a different stage but "render visible," thus contributing to the individual and social permanent labor of social flesh's institution.

As I have shown in this and the previous sections of the paper, Merleau-Ponty's readings of Machiavelli, Weber, and Sartre, together with our discussion of the incompatibility of his thought with that of Habermas' theory of communicative action, offer a set of contrasts that, almost perceptually, revealed and confirmed the central features of his views of politics, action, and democracy. Merleau-Ponty sides with Machiavelli and Weber against Sartre and—*ex post facto*[65]—Habermas. Yes, but what does this tell us about his politics? It tells us of his aesthetics and his ethics, and of his rejection of all forms of rationalism—either "communicative" or voluntaristic—and of his siding with "difficult thinkers without idols," as he says of Machiavelli in the opening lines of "A Note."

For Merleau-Ponty, however, it was still evident that the model for a "better dialectic"—for the understanding of the political dynamic between the instituting

[62] Coole (2007, p. 144–145).

[63] Merleau-Ponty (1997, p. 176).

[64] Merleau-Ponty (2000, p. 183).

[65] Although Habermas's first major work, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in which most of his program—*veritas non auctoritas facit legem*—was already outlined, was published almost at the same time as the books we are now discussing (in 1962, as opposed to 1960 for *Signs* and 1955 for *Adventures of the Dialectic*).

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and instituted dimensions of the flesh of the social he found in Weber—still required elaboration. His attempt to pursue this elaboration was brief, somehow fragmentary, and obviously unfinished, but it was enough, for him, to point in the direction of a novel interpretation of "the regime we must look for." What Merleau-Ponty's brief elaboration showed is that Weber's political thought was already prepared to claim the hyperdialectical and hyper-reflexive primacy of modern democracy over other forms of political life. The path Merleau-Ponty followed, concluding *Adventures of the Dialectic* with a defense of "parliamentary" democracy, was his critique of the revolutionary experience as a failed attempt at realizing and bringing to a close the institution of society—an institution thus only partially grasped by the traditional form of the dialectic.[66] The fundamental insight of the Epilogue to his book is that if the revolution leads to *Thermidor,* then we have to reconsider our faith in revolution.[67] An insight he restated, using different but familiar, "Machiavellian" words, when he said in his 1960 Preface to *Signs*, again in a critical dialogue with Sartre, that "the condition is not rebellion, it is 'virtue' [*la virtu*] without any reservation. A disappointment for whoever believed in salvation, and in a single means of salvation in all realms."[68] Not a disappointment for him though, since the "last-minute failure" of flesh, and of the flesh of the social, its impossibility to achieving full transparency and reconciliation, is what democracy embraces in embracing political hyper-reflection and hyperdialectics. In the same way that my body cannot grasp itself as touched and touching at the same time—since "the moment I feel my left hand with my right hand, I correspondingly cease touching my right hand with my left hand,"[69]—it is with the being flesh of society: none of its parts is able to fully achieve the reversibility of the social. This "last-minute failure," however, "does not drain all truth from the presentiment I had of being able to touch myself touching: my body… is, as it were, prepared for self-perception, even though it is never itself that is perceived nor itself that perceives."[70] As it is with the flesh of the body, it is with the flesh of the social as well—since it is indeed reversible, but its reversibility can never be total because no party can successfully claim to incarnate the entire visibility of society before itself. The flesh of the body as well as that of language, "in forming itself expresses, at least laterally, an ontogenesis of which it is a part."[71] The political self-shaping of

[66] As Arendt suggested the idea of the revolution seems to be interesting only in its link with the foundation of polities—particularly of democratic republics. The question of the revolution in the traditional sense remains central for the western left; a left that continues to be *intuitively* revolutionary in a context in which this attitude constantly forces it to withdrawing from the political realm in its existing form. A theory of democratic political speech and action is important because the latter becomes fundamental once the revolution institutes the regime that comes to terms with the flesh of the social. See Arendt (1990).

[67] Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato refer to this subject in this way: "Democracy's only possible legitimation lies in a principle contrary to the revolutionary logic, namely, the lasting institutionalization of a new power accompanied by limits to even the new forms of power in terms of rights." Cohen and Arato (1997, p. 454).

[68] Merleau-Ponty (2007, p. 349).

[69] Merleau-Ponty (1997, p. 9).

[70] Ibid.

[71] Ibid., 102.

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democracy is, in brief, of the same kind—it participates of the same ontogenesis of which is part.

5 Conclusion

In the Epilogue to *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Merleau-Ponty's gesture pointed towards reading a foundation for democracy in all that the revolutionary experience failed to achieve. This is how Merleau-Ponty summarizes that transition (and allow me to quote him extensively one final time):

> The question is to know whether…the revolutionary enterprise, a violent enterprise directed toward putting a class in power and spilling blood to do so, is not obliged, as Trotsky said, to consider itself absolute; whether it can make room in itself for a power of contestation and thereby relativize itself; whether something of the belief in the end of history does not always remain in it… If one concentrates all the negativity and all the meaning of history in an existing historical formation, the working class, then one has to give a free hand to those who represent it in power, since *all that is other is an enemy*. Then there no longer is an opposition, no longer a manifest dialectic. Truth and action will never communicate if there are not, along with those who act, those who observe them, who confront them with the truth of their action, and who can aspire to replace them in power. There is no dialectic without opposition and freedom, and in a revolution opposition and freedom do not last for long. […] Thus the question arises whether there is not more of a future in a regime that does not intend to remake history from the ground up but only to change it and whether this is not the regime that one must look for, instead of once again entering the circle of revolution.[72]

To what he, later in the text, added:

> If we speak of liberalism, it is in the sense that Communist action and other revolutionary movements are accepted only as a useful menace, as a continual call to order, that we do not believe in the solution of the social problem through the power of the proletarian class or its representatives, that we expect progress only from a conscious action which will confront itself with the judgment of an opposition. Like Weber's heroic liberalism, it lets even what contest it enter its universe, and it is justified in its own eyes only when it understands its opposition. For us a noncommunist left is this double position, posing social problems in terms of struggle and refusing the dictatorship of the proletariat. […] As for the limitations of parliamentary and democratic action, there are those which result from the institution, and they should be accepted, for Parliament is the only known institution that guarantees a minimum of opposition and truth. There are other limitations which are the result of

[72] Merleau-Ponty (1995, p. 207). His emphasis.

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> parliamentary usage and maneuvers; these deserve no respect at all, but they can be denounced in Parliament itself.[73]

These passages, once again, say it all. Revolutionary violence is not questioned morally—its problem is philosophical: that of considering itself absolute. Or, as Merleau-Ponty also puts it, "one does not kill for relative progress."[74] Merleau-Ponty no longer believes the revolutionary model "can make room in itself for a power of contestation and thereby relativize itself;" a condition *sine qua non* for the regime "we must look for." For him, a "belief in the end of history" is immanent to the revolutionary paradigm of social transformation. Moreover, a philosophical model that claims for a social group the embodiment of all of history's truth cannot but "give a free hand to those who represent it in power." And we know what "free" means here—the freedom to identify "all that is other as enemy." Under these conditions, all that Merleau-Ponty claims for society—its being flesh; its being an open field, and equally open to its unfolding in time; its being unable to be grasped from without and in simultaneity—gets radically threatened: under these conditions, there are no longer, "along with those who act, those who observe them, who confront them with the truth of their action, and who can aspire to replace them in power." Is this, somebody could ask, *just* a critique without political value? Are we, regardless Merleau-Ponty's claim to the contrary, before the well known complain of a moralizing politics? What do you, Merleau—as Sartre would have asked—want, a republic of philosophers? Well, may be not so much as a republic of philosophers, but Merleau-Ponty was indeed thinking of a *quasi-philosophical republic*: one that embraces "opposition and freedom," hyper-reflection and hyperdialectics. What I want, he seems to be saying, is a regime that renounces constituent rationalism and therefore embraces society's plural and conflictive labor of institution and self-institution. The question is indeed quite simple: is not there "more of a future in a regime that does not intend to remake history from the ground up but only to change it"?

"And so you renounce being a revolutionary, you accept the social distance which transforms into venial sins exploitation, poverty, famine…"[75]

"I accept it neither more nor less than you do…. To be revolutionary today is to accept a State of which one knows very little or to rely upon a historical grace of which one knows even less; and even that would not be without misery and tears. Is it then cheating to ask to inspect the dice?"

"*Objectively* you accept poverty and exploitation, since you do not join with those who reject it unconditionally."

"They say they reject it, they believe they reject it. But do they reject it *objectively*? … [Rejecting poverty and exploitation] does not require only our good will and our choice but our knowledge, our labor, our criticism, our preference, and our complete presence."

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[73] Ibid., p. 226.

[74] Merleau-Ponty (2007, p. 308).

[75] Ibid., pp. 316–317. Merleau-Ponty concludes his *Adventures of the Dialectic* quoting an—imaginary?—heated dialogue with somebody who rejects his democratic turn. I chose to re-inscribe parts of this same dialogue here. The next few lines come from there.

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For Merleau-Ponty—the so-called "philosopher of ambiguity"—there is no ambiguity here: "For us a noncommunist left is this double position, posing social problems in terms of struggle and refusing the dictatorship of the proletariat." As for the problems of parliamentary democracy, they are of two kinds. First, there are those problems proper to a political form that does not consider itself absolute, and those are the problems that come, ontologically, with being; problems proper to the last-minute failure of the reversibility of flesh and of the being flesh of society. As for the other problems, those are precisely the ones what we have to fight against, and those are the problems that democracy provides the hyper-reflexive and hyperdialectical tools to confront.

"Are you then for today's so-called democracies?" Somebody could ask *me*. "Are you thus saying that there is no alternative to today's financial oligarchies and imperial policies?"

I am of course not saying that more nor less than you do. I am saying that today's plutocratic hijacking of our political regimes is precisely what we have to fight against—in the name of democracy.

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