

# BODIES THAT MATTER?

*From Embodied Subjectivity to Materialism in Merleau-Ponty's Political Philosophy*

ANNE VAN LEEUWEN

## 1. From Existential-Phenomenology to Politics

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is often regarded as the preeminent thinker of embodiment in the tradition of twentieth century phenomenology. In his chef-d'œuvre, *Phenomenology of Perception* (*Phénoménologie de la perception*, 1945), he defends existential-phenomenology as a theory of the subject, while distinguishing the existential-phenomenological subject from idealist and empiricist philosophies of consciousness—positions that he refers to as “idealist reflection” and “objective thought,” respectively. For both transcendental idealism and empirical psychology, the subject is abstract—referring either to the ideality of a transcendental subject or an equally abstract materiality.<sup>1</sup> Merleau-Ponty argues that the existential-phenomenological subject refers neither to transcendental consciousness that is revealed by analytical reflection nor to the functions of the brain that are disclosed by empirical psychology and neuroscience. Phenomenology, he claims, offers a “third way” out of the impasse of this debate between idealist reflection and objective thought,<sup>2</sup>

---

1 The subject understood as the cognitive functions of the brain.

2 This is Lukács's interpretation (and critique) of existential-phenomenology—i.e., that it merely attempts to be a “third way” beyond idealism and materialism. See Lukács, “Existentialism,” in *Marxism and Human Liberation* (New York: Delta, 1973), 244. While Lukács is critical of existential-phenomenology for this reason, I will try to argue that Merleau-Ponty's “third way” leads him directly to Lukács's understanding of the materialist dialectic. I

and the subject disclosed by phenomenological inquiry subverts the metaphysical binaries that plague these debates. As such, he argues that the phenomenological subject must be conceived of as constitutively embodied, situated and historical.

While Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the embodied subject has been the focus of intensive scholarship, the political stakes of his theory of the subject have been less extensively explored.<sup>3</sup> The final chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, however, brings into view the fundamental connection between the constitutively situated and embodied subject of his phenomenological analyses and his nascent materialist politics. In the final chapter on freedom, Merleau-Ponty elucidates his theory of the subject in the context of an analysis of class-consciousness. Here he describes the existential-phenomenological subject as not only embodied and situated but also irreducibly historical, i.e., as inextricably bound to its historical conditions. Freedom, he argues, is not freedom from history but within it. In capitalist modernity, this means that the subject is bound to the historical conditions of commodity production and its constitutive class structure, granting the subject the possibility of grasping the significance of its position vis-à-vis this structure at the level of action. On the basis of this analysis, the phenomenological subject emerges in the final chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception* as the subject of materialist politics.

Merleau-Ponty continues to develop this theory of the subject in his political writings from 1945-1955. In the essay "Marxism and Philosophy" ("Marxisme et philosophie," 1945-1947), he identifies a parallel between his own critique of both idealism and objective thought and Marx's repudiation of both idealism and vulgar materialism. Drawing on Lukács's reading of Marx in *History and Class Consciousness* (*Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein*, 1923)

come back to this point on, see footnote 20.

3 There have of course been significant debates around the import of Merleau-Ponty's analysis of embodied subjectivity for feminist theory. See, for example, Silvia Stoller, "Reflections on Feminist Merleau-Ponty Skepticism," *Hypatia* 15, no.1 (2000), 175-182. What this article examines, however, is the relationship between Merleau-Ponty's analysis of embodied subjectivity and his commitments to a materialist politics.

and his analysis of the materialist dialectic, Merleau-Ponty seizes upon the dialectic as a way to obviate the binary oppositions of metaphysics: consciousness/matter, thought/action, knowledge/history. In this essay, it becomes clear that the materialist dialectic is essential for Merleau-Ponty to fully realize the project of *Phenomenology of Perception*, i.e., to theorize the phenomenological subject beyond the subjectivism of idealist reflection and the vulgar materialism of objective thought.

*Humanism and Terror* (*Humanisme et terreur*, 1947) and *Adventures of the Dialectic* (*Les Aventures de la dialectique*, 1955) develop these earlier insights in different directions. Yet by tracing the evolution of Merleau-Ponty's thought and his analysis of the materialist dialectic from *Phenomenology of Perception* to *Adventures of the Dialectic*, I will identify the embodied subject of *Phenomenology of Perception* as the basis of his later analysis of the peculiar ontological status of the commodity form, i.e., what he identifies in his political writing as the self-consciousness of the commodity (*l'autoconnaissance de la marchandise*). For Merleau-Ponty, the materialist dialectic ultimately points to the self-consciousness of history that cannot be resolved into either subject or object according to the parameters of idealist reflection or objective thought. In this way, it offers a philosophy of history as permanent self-interrogation. What he describes in *Adventures of the Dialectic* as the "ambiguity of the dialectic"<sup>4</sup> represents the realization of the embodied subject of phenomenology that we find in *Phenomenology of Perception*. This interpretation thus departs from standard readings of Merleau-Ponty in two ways: first, it suggests that Merleau-Ponty's ontological commitments cannot be bifurcated from his political commitments—and more precisely, that his earlier philosophy of embodied subjectivity is indissociable from his materialist philosophy of history in his later thought; second, it claims that Merleau-Ponty's self-avowed renewed faith in liberalism in his later work is belied by his persistent commitment to a materialist dialectic.<sup>5</sup>

---

4 Ibid., 69.

5 This interpretation differs most sharply from standard readings of Merleau-Ponty's political philosophy largely because it attempts to rethink

## 2. Freedom and Class-Consciousness

In the final chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty's discussion of freedom once again attempts to circumvent the dichotomy between objective thought and idealist reflection. In the context of the issue of freedom, these two poles manifest, respectively, as the commitment to a material, scientific account of causality, on one hand, and "the assertion of an absolute freedom divorced from the outside,"<sup>6</sup> on the other. For objective thought, the existence of freedom is impossible, while for idealist reflection freedom is boundless and unconditioned. Contra these two extremes, Merleau-Ponty seeks to make sense of what he identifies as the constitutively situated nature of freedom—that "there is no freedom without a field."<sup>7</sup> What this means, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that freedom refers neither to the abstract and unconditioned freedom of pure consciousness nor is it annulled by material-causal determinism. As he puts it:

The world is already constituted, but also never completely constituted; in the first case we are acted upon, in the second we are open to an infinite number of possibilities. But this analysis is still abstract, for we exist in both ways at once. There is, therefore, never determinism and never absolute choice. I am never a thing and never a bare consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

---

what, for Merleau-Ponty, is the philosophical core of Marxism. Unlike other readers of Merleau-Ponty, I argue that the key to understanding his interpretation of the materialist dialectic is Marx's analysis of the commodity form in *Capital* and its interpretation in the work of Lukács. Ultimately, my interpretation of dialectic in Merleau-Ponty's thought comes closest to Barry Cooper's reading in *Merleau-Ponty and Marxism: From Terror to Reform*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979). As Cooper puts it, citing Merleau-Ponty: "A thematised and predicated dialectic is a 'bad' dialectic, and 'and this is what happens when the *meaning and sense (sens)* of dialectical movement is defined apart from the concrete constellation."

6 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York; London: Routledge, 2002), 507.

7 Ibid., 510.

8 Ibid., 527. See Keith Whitmoyer's *The Philosophy of Ontological Lateness: Merleau-Ponty and the Tasks of Thinking* (Bloomsbury, 2017), for the most systematic and developed elaboration of this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's thought

Merleau-Ponty's claim is that the very shape and form that freedom takes is dependent on its being situated in the world, i.e., freedom is literally formless without the bond that embeds it within the world. As he puts it in the essay "Marxism and Philosophy": "it is a matter of understanding that the bond which attaches man to the world is at the same time his way to freedom."<sup>9</sup>

Merleau-Ponty attempts to elaborate his account of freedom in *Phenomenology of Perception* vis-à-vis the phenomenon of class-consciousness. In this discussion, he rejects both a positivist view of history that he identifies with objective thought along with the abstract view offered by idealist reflection. From the standpoint of objective thought, class-consciousness is reducible to the conditions of production; as such, the positions of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie are identical with their objective positions within the system of production. Class-consciousness becomes an epiphenomenon of these conditions and the revolutionary action of the proletariat merely an index of the inexorable unfolding of the logic of history. In contrast, according idealist reflection, class-consciousness is reducible to a choice or decision on the part of the abstract subject of consciousness—e.g., one is a proletarian or bourgeois to the extent that he or she chooses to view his or her position vis-à-vis that particular optic. On the latter view, revolutionary action is supplanted by the *idea* of class-consciousness insofar as to be proletarian it suffices to understand the phenomenon of exploitation and to take up this view of history in an act of judgment.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast with these two views, Merleau-Ponty argues for what he describes as an "existential" understanding of class-con-

---

in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

9 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Marxism and Philosophy," in *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 130.

10 As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "[t]o make class-consciousness the outcome of a decision and a choice is to say that problems are solved on the day they are posed, that every question already contains the reply that it awaits; it is, in short, to revert to immanence and abandon the attempt to understand history." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 519.

sciousness. According to him,

I am not conscious of being working class or middle class simply because, as a matter of fact, I sell my labor or, equally as a matter of fact, because my interests are bound up with capitalism, nor do I become one or the other on the day on which I elect to view history in light of the class struggle: what happens is that ‘I exist as working class’ or ‘I exist as middle class’ in the first place, and it is this mode of dealing with the world and society which provides both the motives for my revolutionary or conservative projects and my explicit judgments of the type: ‘I am working class’ or ‘I am middle class’, without it being possible to deduce the former from the latter, or vice versa. What makes me a proletarian is not the economic system or the society considered as systems of impersonal forces, but these institutions as I carry them within me and experience them; nor is it an intellectual operation devoid of motive, but my way of being in the world within this institutional framework.<sup>11</sup>

His point is that class-consciousness cannot be reduced to the expression of objective conditions—“it is never the case that my objective position in the production process is sufficient to awaken class-consciousness”<sup>12</sup>—but neither is it simply the result of an intellectual project or voluntarist decision to view history through a Marxist lens. Rather, class-consciousness refers to the experience of exploitation within the system of production that is fundamental to existence within capitalism. Insofar as existence within capitalism is fundamentally structured by my class position, this experience of being proletarian or being bourgeois constitutes the motivational horizon of all of my existential projects without necessarily being made thematic.<sup>13</sup> What this means is that I exist as proletarian or bourgeois, i.e., being proletarian or bourgeois is

---

11 Ibid., 515.

12 Ibid., 514.

13 This is why, he argues, that revolutionary action should not be conceived of as an intellectual project but rather an existential one, consisting in “the polarization of life towards a goal which is both determinate and indeterminate, which, to the person concerned, is entirely unrepresented, and which is recognized only on being attained” (Ibid., 518).

endemic to my mode of being in the world and my relations with others, and it is this experience that is prior to, and the ground of, anythetic judgment I might make about capitalism.

Here we return to Merleau-Ponty's broader claim that freedom exists only within a field. Consciousness is not simply derived from class relations, as vulgar materialism would suggest, and thus freedom is not simply chimerical. Neither is it the case, however, that I first exist as consciousness in the abstract—free and unconditioned—and only secondarily exist within the historical conditions of the system of production, i.e., as proletarian or bourgeois.<sup>14</sup> As Merleau-Ponty argues,

At the outset, I am not an individual beyond class, I am situated in a social environment, and my freedom, though it may have the power to commit me elsewhere, has not the power to transform me instantaneously into what I decide to be. Thus to be a bourgeois or a worker is not only to be aware of being one or the other, it is to identify oneself as worker or bourgeois through an implicit existential project which merges into our way of patterning the world and co-existing with other people. My decision draws together a spontaneous meaning of my life which it may confirm or repudiate, but not annul.<sup>15</sup>

The subject of freedom, then, is not the abstract subject of transcendental consciousness—the unconditioned origin and constitutive centre of meaning and significance.<sup>16</sup> Rather, the subject of freedom exists within a socio-historical environment that is structured by a significance that the subject does not constitute, a significance that includes, among other things, the historical conditions of the system of production.<sup>17</sup> To exist within modernity is to exist

---

14        “Both idealism and objective thinking fail to pin down the coming into being of class-consciousness, the former because it deduces actual existence from consciousness, the latter because it derives consciousness from *de facto* existence, and both because they overlook the relation of motivation” (Ibid., 520).

15        Ibid.

16        “I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and through them, all the rest.” Ibid., 525.

17        “My life must have a significance which I do not constitute; there must

within global capitalism, and thus for the subject of modernity, being proletarian or being bourgeois is not a secondary or derivative mode of existence but fundamental to the existence of this historical subject. Indeed, as Merleau-Ponty points out, “[t]here is therefore no occasion to ask ourselves why the thinking subject or consciousness perceives itself as a man, or an incarnate or historical subject, nor must we treat this apperception as a second order operation which it somehow performs starting from its absolute existence.”<sup>18</sup> The experience of class is rather inscribed in the structure and motivation of all of one’s existential projects and relations with others—it constitutes what Merleau-Ponty describes as the “spontaneous meaning of my life”, i.e., a “significance that I do not constitute.”<sup>19</sup> Freedom, he argues, is neither obviated by this spontaneous significance nor does it exist in isolation from it; rather, freedom draws upon this significance. What this means, he argues, is that I am free to confirm my class position by acting in solidarity with others, or to repudiate it by refusing to take up a revolutionary existential project, but I am not free to annul the significance of the socio-historical reality of the conditions that constitute the field of my freedom.

### 3. Marx’s Philosophy and the Dialectic

Merleau-Ponty’s essay “Marxism and Philosophy”, which was written between 1945 and 1947, functions both chronologically and thematically as a bridge between *Phenomenology of Perception* and *Humanism and Terror*. In this essay Merleau-Ponty returns to the issue of class-consciousness, criticizing what he sees as the tendency of his contemporaries to interpret Marx’s philosophy in positivist strictly speaking be an intersubjectivity; each one of us must be both anonymous in the sense of absolutely individual, and anonymous in the sense of absolutely general. Our being in the world is the concrete bearer of this double anonymity” (Ibid., 521).

18 Ibid., 524.

19 Ibid., 521. That is, as he puts it later, “[t]he *Sinnggebung* is not merely centrifugal, which is why the subject of history is not the individual.” Ibid., 522.

terms—i.e., “to reduce man to the state of a scientific object.”<sup>20</sup> In contrast with this tendency, he insists that Marxism is inimical not only with idealist reflection but also with objective thought, i.e., that Marx’s critique of idealism is equally a repudiation of vulgar materialism.<sup>21</sup> In this essay, he appeals to Marx as an ally in his continued critique of both objective thought and idealist reflection.<sup>22</sup> What “Marxism and Philosophy” introduces, however, is a discussion of the materialist dialectic. According to Merleau-Ponty, it is vis-à-vis the materialist dialectic that Marx’s philosophy breaks with the tradition of metaphysics and its founding dissociation of “matter” and “consciousness,” a dissociation that subtends the positions of both objective thought and idealist reflection. The central import of Marx’s dialectic, for Merleau-Ponty, is that matter and consciousness cannot be considered separately.<sup>23</sup> In his turn to the dialectic, Merleau-Ponty’s existential-phenomenology ceases to be merely another philosophical attempt to find a “third way” beyond idealism and materialism.<sup>24</sup>

20 Merleau-Ponty, “Marxism and Philosophy,” 125.

21 We find this critique of vulgar materialism and “bourgeois voluntarism” or idealist reflection also in Lukács’ work: “as the so-called Machists among Marx’s supporters have demonstrated, it even reinforces the view that reality with its ‘obedience to laws,’ in the sense used by bourgeois, contemplative materialism and the classical economics with which it is so closely bound up, is impenetrable, fatalistic and immutable. That Machism can also give birth to an equally bourgeois voluntarism does not contradict this. Fatalism and voluntarism are only mutually contradictory to an undialectical and un-historical mind” Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 4.

22 Yet as Merleau-Ponty points out, it is precisely Marx’s rejection of vulgar materialism that tends to be missed by contemporary interpreters. What lends credibility to this reading, he suggests, “is that Marx is fighting on two fronts. On the one hand, he is opposed to all forms of mechanistic thought; on the other, he is waging war with idealism.” Merleau-Ponty, “Marxism and Philosophy,” 128.

23 “The question has sometimes been raised, and with reason, as to how a materialism could be dialectical; how matter, taken in the strict sense of the word, could contain the principle of productivity and novelty which is called dialectic. It is because in Marxism ‘matter’—and indeed, ‘consciousness’—is never considered separately” Ibid., 129.

24 This is Lukács’s interpretation of existential-phenomenology: “mod-

Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Marx both in this essay and throughout his later work is deeply influenced by Lukács' reading of Marx in *History and Class Consciousness*.<sup>25</sup> Here, Lukács' critique of reification plays a crucial role. Reification, for Lukács, refers to the reduction of all aspects of existence to the form of the commodity—i.e., things, people and their relation to the world and to each other. As such, the phenomenon of reification is specific to the development of capitalism in which the commodity becomes the universal category of social life.<sup>26</sup> Lukács points out that what Marx claims is peculiar to the commodity is its “phantom-like objectivity” or “sensuous super-sensuous” form—i.e., that what is in fact a social relation (the production and exchange of commodities) appears in the form of a thing (the commodity as a congealed quantum of labor-power).<sup>27</sup> In virtue of this form of appearance, ern phenomenology is one the numerous philosophical methods which seek to rise above both idealism and materialism by discovering a philosophical ‘third way,’ by making intuition the true source of knowledge” Georg Lukács, “Existentialism,” *Marxism and Human Liberation* (New York: Delta, 1973), 244.

25 Not only does Merleau-Ponty cite Lukács's essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”, he also uses the same epigraph that Lukács uses in this essay as the epigraph to “Marxism and Philosophy” in *History and Class Consciousness*. Merleau-Ponty's sympathy for Lukács prior to *Adventures of the Dialectic* likely reflects the fact that Lukács's polemic against existentialism and his public feud with Sartre occurs only in 1949 with the publication of “Marxismus und Existentialismus” along with a lecture tour in Paris and a series of interviews conducted in the same year in which Lukács publically denounces Sartre. See for example Mitchell Cohen, “Existentialism, Marxism, Structuralism,” in *The Wager of Lucien Goldman* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 213. Merleau-Ponty's treatment of Lukács in *Adventures of the Dialectic* is more ambivalent than in his earlier writings.

26 “Only in this context does the reification produced by commodity relations assume decisive importance both for the objective evolution of society and for the stance adopted by men towards it. Only then does the commodity become crucial for the subjugation of men's consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression and for their attempts to comprehend the process or to rebel against its disastrous effects and liberate themselves from servitude to the ‘second nature’ so created” Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 86.

27 According to Marx, “the mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labor as objective characteristics of the products

what is in fact a contingent and historically specific form of social relation accrues the appearance of objectivity.<sup>28</sup> This form of appearance is what Marx famously calls “fetishism” and Lukács famously describes as “second nature”—i.e., that because this social relation appears in the form of a thing and thus as objective and immediately given, in the commodity form we seem to confront an autonomous reality that is natural, intransient and immutable. As Lukács puts it:

[M]an in capitalist society confronts a reality ‘made’ by himself (as a class) which appears to him to be a natural phenomenon alien to himself; he is wholly at the mercy of its ‘laws’, his activity is confined to the exploitation of the inexorable fulfillment of certain individual laws for his own (egoistic) interests. But even while ‘acting’ he remains, in the nature of the case, the object and not the subject of events. The field of his action becomes wholly internalized: it consists on the one hand of the awareness of the laws which he uses and, on the other, of his awareness of his inner reactions to the course taken by events.<sup>29</sup>

The form that the world, the subject and all human relations accrue under the historically specific conditions of generalized commodity of production thereby acquires the objective appearance of a natural phenomenon, i.e., something intractable, unconditioned, and immediately given.<sup>30</sup>

---

of labor themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things (Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy* [London: Penguin, 1990], 165).

By donning the form of useful things, these socio-historical relations of appear as something natural or non-symbolic, what Lukács famously described in *History and Class Consciousness* as “second nature” Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 86.

28 Merleau-Ponty picks up this account of reification in “Marxism and Philosophy”. As he puts it, “[t]he bourgeois ideologies which contaminate all of bourgeois society, including its proletariat, are not *appearances*; they mystify bourgeois society and present themselves to it in the guise of a stable world. They are exactly as ‘real’ as structures of capitalist economy, with which they form a single system” Merleau-Ponty, “Marxism and Philosophy,” 132.

29 Ibid., 135.

30 As Merleau-Ponty argues, this same critique of reification applies reflexively to vulgar materialism: “A Marxist political economy can speak of

For Lukács, the universality of the commodity form within capitalist modernity calls for a philosophical method that is adequate to this form—i.e., it impels a shift from metaphysics to dialectic. The founding belief in the immediate givenness of reality as a thing-in-itself is the hallmark of what Lukács calls “bourgeois metaphysics.” From the standpoint of metaphysics, subject and object are rigidly opposed, and thought accorded the status of a merely subjective mediation of reality that is unconditioned and immediately given.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, from the standpoint of dialectical thought, objectivity is constituted rather than immediately given, and the mediation of thought is constitutive of the objectivity of the thing. This means, in turn, that mediation is not something merely subjective, “foisted on to the objects from outside,”<sup>32</sup> i.e., it does not refer to subjective judgments of “value” as opposed to how things are in themselves.<sup>33</sup> Rather the object is constitutively mediated: The “empirical existence of objects is itself mediated and only appears to be unmediated in so far as the awareness of mediation is lacking so that the objects are torn from the complex of their true determinants and placed in artificial isolation.”<sup>34</sup> A dialectical method thus does not introduce a subjective veil over reality; rather it makes visible a structure of reality that is oth-

lows only within qualitatively distinct structures, which must be described in terms of history. *A priori*, scientism seems a conservative idea since it causes us to mistake the merely momentary for the eternal. Throughout the history of Marxism, in fact, the fetishism of science has always made its appearance where the revolutionary conscience was faltering...As Lukács notes, scientism is a particular case of alienation or objectification (*Verdinglichung*) which deprives man of his human reality and makes him confuse himself with things.” *Ibid.*, 126.

31 “The belief that the transformation of the immediately given into a truly understood (and not merely an immediately perceived) and for that reason really objective reality, i.e., the belief that the impact of the category of mediation upon the picture of the world is merely ‘subjective’, i.e., is no more than an evaluation of a reality that ‘remains unchanged’, all this is as much to say that objective reality has the character of a thing-in-itself.” Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 150.

32 *Ibid.*, 162.

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*, 163.

erwise occluded—i.e., it constitutes “*the manifestation of its objective structure.*”<sup>35</sup> Reality conceived by metaphysical thought as a composite of isolated things immediately given is thereby supplanted by an understanding of the relations that mediate reality and constitute it as a social totality.

Lukács elaborates the phenomenon of class-consciousness in these terms. Class-consciousness does not refer to a merely subjective judgment of the proletariat; rather it is the objective manifestation of the structural conditions that are otherwise elided by the conditions of commodity production. As such, class-consciousness involves the self-knowledge of the worker within this system of production, which is to say, the self-knowledge of the commodity form: “Above all the worker can only become conscious of his existence in society when he becomes aware of himself as a commodity... Inasmuch as he is incapable in practice of raising himself above the role of object his consciousness is the *self-consciousness of the commodity.*”<sup>36</sup> Consciousness, then, does not refer to something merely ideational or subjective; rather it refers to the self-understanding of the commodity form.<sup>37</sup> It is this understanding, moreover, that brings about a practical transformation in relations of production. Insofar as self-consciousness is no longer conceived of as knowledge of the object that stands over and against consciousness but as the self-consciousness *of* the object (*das Selbstbewusstsein des Gegenstandes*), consciousness itself involves a practical transformation of that object.<sup>38</sup> As Lukács puts it, “since consciousness here is not the knowledge of an opposed object but is the self-consciousness of the object *the act of consciousness overthrows*

---

35 Ibid., 162.

36 Ibid., 168.

37 “The specific nature of this kind of commodity had consisted in the fact that beneath the cloak of the thing lay a relation between men, that beneath the quantifying crust there was a qualitative, living core. Now that this core is revealed, it becomes possible to recognize the fetish character of *every commodity* based on the commodity character of labor power.” Ibid., 169.

38 This knowledge, he argues, “*brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge.*” Ibid.

*the objective form of its object.*”<sup>39</sup>

According to Lukács, then, it is precisely the dialectical method that allows us to understand that class-consciousness is at once constituted by history and at the same time not simply determined by history. As he puts it:

Since consciousness appears as the immanent product of the historical dialectic, it likewise appears to be dialectical. That is to say, this consciousness is nothing but the expression of historical necessity. The proletariat ‘has no ideals to realize’. When its consciousness is put into practice it can only breathe life into the things which the dialectics of history have forced to a crisis; it can never ‘in practice’ ignore the course of history, forcing on it what are no more than its own desires or knowledge. For it is itself nothing but the contradictions of history that have become conscious. On the other hand, however, a dialectical necessity is far from being the same thing as mechanical, causal necessity... In addition to the mere contradiction—the automatic product of capitalism—a *new* element is required: the consciousness of the proletariat must become deed.<sup>40</sup>

What Lukács argues, then, is that a dialectical view of class-consciousness refuses both the determinism of vulgar Marxism as well as subjectivism of idealist reflection. Rather than something ideational and subjective, class-consciousness refers to the self-understanding *of* history. This does not mean, however, that class-conscious is simply causally determined by its historical situation. Class-conscious involves a transformation in the object of knowledge and thus a transformation of this situation. This transformation takes places vis-à-vis the consciousness of the proletariat in the form of praxis.<sup>41</sup>

---

39 Ibid., 178.

40 Ibid., 177-178.

41 Tom Rockmore argues that “as Merleau-Ponty reads Lukács, Marx’s concept of praxis provides the means to circumvent the sterile, bourgeois dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity by revealing their possible future unity through the action of the proletariat.” Tom Rockmore, “Merleau-Ponty, Marx, and Marxism: The Problem of History,” *Studies in East European Thought* 48 (1996), 63-81, 76.

Lukács's dialectical interpretation of class-consciousness is crucial for Merleau-Ponty's reading of Marx in this essay and elsewhere. According to Merleau-Ponty, "Marxism is not a philosophy of the subject, but it is just as far from a philosophy of the object: it is a philosophy of history."<sup>42</sup> Here, he argues that existentialism shares with Marxism this historical orientation.<sup>43</sup>

As its name suggests, existential philosophy consists of taking as one's theme not only knowledge [*connaissance*] or consciousness understood as an activity which autonomously posits immanent and transparent objects but also existence; i.e., an activity given to itself in a natural and historical situation and as incapable of abstracting itself from that situation as it is of reducing itself to it. Knowledge finds itself put back into the totality of human praxis and, as it were, given ballast by it. The 'subject' is no longer just the epistemological subject but it is the human subject who, by means of a continual dialectic, thinks in terms of his situation, forms his categories in contact with his experience, and modifies this situation and this experience by the meaning he discovers in them.<sup>44</sup>

While idealism posits consciousness as disjoined from the world and objective thought reduces consciousness to the world, existentialism approaches the subject of consciousness as dialectically embedded in its historical situation—i.e., as consciousness of that situation and as such, as practically engaged with and transformative of that situation. Knowledge is no longer confined to consciousness and divorced from embodied, situated and effective existence.<sup>45</sup> Instead, for existential philosophy, knowledge and praxis are indissolubly connected. What is crucial, then, is that the

42 Merleau-Ponty, "Marxism and Philosophy," 130.

43 "Society for man is not an accident he suffers but a dimension of his being. He is not in society as an object is in a box; rather, he assumes it by what is innermost in him" (Ibid., 128-129).

44 Ibid., 133-134.

45 "...man is a productivity, a relation to something other than himself, and not an inert thing. Shall we then define man as consciousness? This would still be a chimerical realization of the human essence, for once man is defined as consciousness, he becomes cut off from all things, from his body and his effective existence." Ibid., 129-130.

subject of existential-phenomenology is reconceived by Merleau-Ponty here as the subject of the materialist dialectic.<sup>46</sup>

#### 4. Ethical Idealism and Liberal Ideology

This account of the materialist dialectic is at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's political philosophy in *Humanism and Terror*. Broadly speaking, Merleau-Ponty wrote this book as a response to the fraught historical and political situation of postwar geopolitical polarization and the pseudo-alternative this situation offered up to intellectuals in siding with either Soviet communism or American liberal capitalism. As he puts it in the preface,

We find ourselves in an inextricable situation. The Marxist critique of capitalism is still valid and it is clear that anti-Sovietism today resembles the brutality, hybris [sic], vertigo, and anguish that already found expression in fascism. On the other side, the Revolution has come to a halt: it maintains and aggravates the dictatorial apparatus while renouncing the revolutionary liberty of the proletariat in the Soviets and its Party and abandoning the humane control of the state. It is impossible to be an anti-Communist and it is not possible to be a Communist.<sup>47</sup>

Merleau-Ponty argues that Arthur Koestler's famous critique of communism in *Darkness at Noon* (*Sonnenfinsternis*, 1940) as well as *The Yogi and the Commissar* (1945) is symptomatic of this situation, reinscribing this pseudo-alternative on a conceptual plane. On one hand, Koestler conflates Marx's philosophy with Soviet communism. As such, Merleau-Ponty argues that Koestler's critique betrays a fundamental misunderstanding, reducing Marx's philosophy to what amounts to a deterministic, "mechanistic philosophy" that Koestler describes as a "philosophy of the Commissar."<sup>48</sup> From

---

46 "Man no longer appears as a product of his environment or an absolute legislator but emerges as a product-producer, the locus where necessity can turn into concrete liberty." *Ibid.*, 134.

47 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), xxi.

48 "One is tempted to reply to Koestler that Marxism has actually transcended the alternative in which Rubashov loses himself. And indeed there

this misreading, Koestler accuses Marx of reducing consciousness vis-à-vis history. On Koestler's view, history operates in Marx's thought as an external force analogous to the causal determinacy of physical processes in the material world. Koestler thus mistakenly conflates Marx's philosophy of history with the metaphysical position of objective thought.<sup>49</sup> Standing opposed to the philosophy of the Commissar, is what Koestler describes as the "philosophy of the Yogi"—i.e., a purely spiritual and inward account of consciousness that is divorced from effective existence. The philosophy of the Yogi, for Koestler, signifies the abstract values of liberal humanism. Koestler seeks to reconcile this opposition; what he looking for, according to Merleau-Ponty, "is a 'synthesis' between the philosophy of the external which reduces everything to the framework of causal explanation, and the philosophy of the inward which confines itself to descriptions of the different levels of being and loses sight of their effective relations."<sup>50</sup> Yet what is missing from Koestler's analysis, he argues, is an understanding the materialist dialectic.<sup>51</sup> Such an analysis would reveal that the philosophy of the external and the philosophy of the inward are

---

is very little Marxism in *Darkness at Noon*... The solidarity of the individual with history which Rubashov and his comrades experienced in the revolutionary struggle gets translated into mechanistic philosophy which disfigures it and is the source of the inhuman alternatives with which Rubashov finishes." *Ibid.*, 14.

49 "The whole [is] regarded as an assemblage of simple elements: life as a modality of physical nature, man as a modality of life, consciousness as a product or even an appearance—an homogenous world, stretched out flat without foreground or background; human action explained causally like any physical process; ethics and politics reduced to a utilitarian calculus; in a word, the total affirmation of the external." *Ibid.*, 161.

50 *Ibid.*, 163.

51 "But who has said that history is a clockwork and the individual a wheel? It was not Marx; it was Koestler. It is strange that in Koestler there is no inkling of the commonplace notion that by the very fact of its duration, history sketches the outline for the transformation of its own structures, changing and reversing its own direction because, in the last analysis, men come to collide with the structures that alienate them inasmuch as economic man is also a human being. In short, Koestler has never given much thought to the simple idea of dialectic in history." *Ibid.*, 23.

both expressions of the failure to grasp the relationship between consciousness and history, between thought and its object, and between knowledge and praxis.

Pointing to the limits of Koestler's interpretation of Marx, Merleau-Ponty returns to the idea of the materialist dialectic. Crucially, what Koestler misses, he argues, is that this reconciliation of the subjective and objective can already be found in Marx's philosophy. Marx, following Hegel, has abandoned pure, abstract self-consciousness as the foundation of his philosophy in favor of taking up the position of situated, historical existence.<sup>52</sup> As Merleau-Ponty puts it:

We only know of situated consciousnesses which blend themselves with the situation they take and are unable to complain at being identified with it or at the neglect of the incorruptible innocence of conscience. When one says that there is a history one means precisely that each person committing an act does so not only in his own name, engages not only himself, but also others whom he makes use of, so that as soon as we begin to live, we lose the alibi of good intentions; we are what we do to others, we yield the right to be respected as noble souls.<sup>53</sup>

Marxism, then, is not the "negation of subjectivity," a form of "scientific socialism," but rather "a theory of concrete subjectivity and concrete action—of subjectivity and action committed within a historical situation."<sup>54</sup> As such, Marx's philosophy also necessarily abandons the purity of abstract principles and values—the "original innocence" of pure consciousness along with the separation of theory and praxis.<sup>55</sup>

---

52 "...these are precisely the axioms that Marxism, following Hegel, questions by introducing the perspective of one consciousness upon another. What we find in the private life of a couple, or in a society of friends, or, with all the more reason, in history, is not a series of juxtaposed 'self-consciousnesses.' I never encounter face to face another person's consciousness any more than he meets mine. I am not for him nor is he for me a pure existence for itself. We are both for one another situated being, characterized by a certain way of treating other people and nature." *Ibid.*, 108.

53 *Ibid.*, 109.

54 *Ibid.*, 22.

55 According to Merleau-Ponty, this view of the co-constitutive relation-

Without this understanding of the materialist dialectic, Merleau-Ponty argues that Koestler's critique of Soviet communism devolves into ideology. Here, he draws on Marx and Engels's claim in *The German Ideology* (*Die deutsche Ideologie*, 1945-1946) that ideological consciousness is an expression of the antagonisms of capitalist production. As Marx and Engels famously argue, "[c]onsciousness [*das Bewusstsein*] can never be anything else than conscious being [*das bewusste Sein*], and the being of men is their actual life-process."<sup>56</sup> If, as they claim, under the conditions of commodity production, human existence is structured by the fundamental antagonism that characterizes these productive relations, this antagonism is constitutive of consciousness and manifest in the form of ideology. In this sense, "[t]he phantoms formed in the brains of men are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process."<sup>57</sup> The primary form that ideological consciousness takes, they argue, is that it views its own relationship to these material conditions precisely in an inverted form: the fact that consciousness is constituted by this socio-historical antagonism gives rise to the illusion of its transcendence and autonomy from these productive relations. As Marx and Engels put it:

From this moment onwards consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it *really* represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of

---

ship between consciousness and history, or understanding and effective existence underlies Marx's theory of class-consciousness: "it is not a matter of there being *both* an objective proletarian condition and an awareness of its condition which might be added to it gratuitously. The 'objective' condition itself induces the proletarian to become conscious of his condition, the very act of living that way motivates the awakening of consciousness." *Ibid.*, 115.

56 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus, 1998), 42. As Étienne Balibar puts it, "*The German Ideology* sets out an 'ontology of production' since, as Marx himself tells us, it is production which shapes *man's being*, to which he will oppose his consciousness: *Bewusst-sein*, literally his 'being conscious'." Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx* (London: Verso, 2014), 35.

57 Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 42.

‘pure’ theory, theology, philosophy, morality, etc.<sup>58</sup>

This ideological division of the material and ideal, they argue, is produced by and reflects the constitutive social antagonism of capitalism—i.e., that the reproduction of the bourgeois social order is compatible with the expression and realization of liberal-bourgeois values only in what Herbert Marcuse aptly describes as an “internalized and rationalized form.”<sup>59</sup> According to Marcuse, this abstract and ideal sphere of liberal values, what Marx and Engels refer to as “pure theory, theology, philosophy, morality, etc.,” is at once “essentially different from the factual world of daily struggle for existence, yet realizable by every individual for himself ‘from within,’ without any transformation of the state of fact.”<sup>60</sup> Liberal-bourgeois values are thereby established beyond and outside of the existing conditions of life and simultaneously “democratized,” invoked as accessible to all independently of the actual conditions of existence. Real, sensuous human beings invoke the value of freedom, equality and happiness that are available to them only in the abstract. The crucial point, for Marx and Engels, is that these abstractions reflect the material conditions that have produced them but in a distorted form.<sup>61</sup>

This critique of ideology is fundamental for Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of liberal capitalism in *Humanism and Terror*. Here, he identifies the abstract consciousness of transcendental idealism as the consciousness of liberal bourgeois ideology. This abstract idealist philosophy of consciousness expresses the antagonism that separates the ideal from the material. As such, it represents the illusion of ideology, namely that, as Marx and Engels put it, “consciousness is something other than consciousness of existing practice.”<sup>62</sup>

58 Ibid., 50.

59 Herbert Marcuse, *The Affirmative Character of Culture* (London: Mayfly, 2009), 73.

60 Ibid., 70.

61 What Balibar describes as “the dream of an impossible universality” that cannot be actualized in the current social order” Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, 48.

62 Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 50.

According to Merleau-Ponty, liberal capitalism appeals precisely to this subject of consciousness as the ground of its politics, invoking the principled non-violence of humanistic values in order to criticize the ostensibly violent means of Marxism.<sup>63</sup> As such, liberal capitalist societies appeal to the abstract ideals of freedom and equality apart from an analysis of material conditions within these societies, defending these abstract values, while at the same time dissimulating the violence of exploitation, oppression and subjugation that play a structural role in the material production and reproduction of life within capitalism.<sup>64</sup> On this basis, Merleau-Ponty argues that liberal humanism reflects the material conditions of existence and the relations of production, but in an inverted (i.e., ideological) form—the pure principles of its ethical idealism obfuscate the structural violence that is endemic to the relations of production.<sup>65</sup> As he put it, violence “in the liberal state, may be put outside the law, and, in effect, suppressed in the commerce of ideas though maintained in daily life in the form of colonization, unemployment, and wages.”<sup>66</sup> It is therefore only on the basis of this ideological abstraction that liberal capitalism can present itself as the ally of universal freedom and equality, and violence as anathema.<sup>67</sup> By concealing the *de facto* violence of

---

63 Merleau-Ponty, however, rejects the claim that Marxism is tantamount to a form of realpolitik: “Marxism in principle denies any conflict between the exigencies of realism and those of ethics since the so-called ‘ethics’ of capitalism is a mystification, and the power of the proletariat is in reality what the bourgeois apparatus is only nominally. Marxism is no immorality but rather the determination not to consider virtues and ethics only in the heart of each man but also in the coexistence of men. The alternative between the actual and the ideal is transcended in the concept of the proletariat as the concrete vehicle of values.” Merleau-Ponty, “Marxism and Philosophy,” 125-126.

64 “Western humanism is a *humanism of comprehension*—a few mount guard around the treasure of Western culture; the rest are subservient” Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, 176.

65 As such, he insists that “the United States, with its anti-Semitism, racism, and strikebreaking, is only nominally the ‘land of the free.’” *Ibid.*, 174.

66 *Ibid.*, 103. He also insists that “the Revolution takes on and directs a violence which bourgeois society tolerates in unemployment and in war and disguises with the name of misfortune.” *Ibid.*, 107.

67 In *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher describes the deflation of this

liberal capitalism, Merleau-Ponty argues that this form of ethical idealism in fact functions as a covert defense of bourgeois exploitation.<sup>68</sup>

The crucial claim, then, for Merleau-Ponty, is that to abandon idealist reflection is necessarily to abandon ethical idealism. Rather than abstract and unconditioned, what the dialectic introduces is an analysis of consciousness as the self-consciousness of these material conditions, i.e., self-consciousness of the conditions of commodity production. Consciousness is no longer simply on the side of the subject but passes over into the object and the object, in turn, incarnates consciousness. Consciousness is thereby disjoined not only from the abstract ideality but also thereby from the purity of ethical idealism. The implication, for Merleau-Ponty, is that we must cease “to judge liberalism in terms of the ideas it espouses and inscribes in constitutions” and rather demand “that these ideas be compared with the prevailing relations between men in the liberal state.”<sup>69</sup> We can adequately assess liberal capitalism and actually existing communism only from the standpoint of this dialectical method.<sup>70</sup>

claim—from the lionization of liberal capitalism described by Merleau-Ponty to what Fisher describes as the “capitalist realism” of the late-twentieth and twenty-first century. Fisher invokes remarks by Alain Badiou to make this point: “partisans of the established order cannot really call [capitalism] ideal or wonderful. So instead, they have decided to say that all the rest is horrible. Sure, they say, we many not live in a condition of perfect Goodness. But we’re lucky we don’t live in a condition of Evil. Our democracy is not perfect. But it’s better than the bloody dictatorships. Capitalism is unjust. But it’s not criminal like Stalinism...” Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (London: Zero Book, 2009), 5.

68 In turn, the state socialism of the USSR justifies these violent means on the basis not only of its ostensibly non-violent ends but also on the basis of the de facto and extant violence of liberal-democracies. Within the USSR violence and deception have official status while humanity is to be found in daily life. On the contrary, in democracies the principles are human but deception and violence rule daily life.” Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, 180.

69 Ibid., xiv.

70 As Merleau-Ponty argues, this shift: “puts the debate between the Western democracies and communism into its proper domain, which is not a debate between the Yogi and the Commissar but between one Commissar and another. If the events of the last thirty years lead us to doubt that the world proletarian power in one country establishes reciprocal relations among men, they

## 5. Return of the Dialectic

There is an undeniable shift that occurs in Merleau-Ponty's treatment of Marxism between the publication of *Humanism and Terror* and *Adventures of the Dialectic*. By 1955, his earlier sympathy with the philosophy of Marx has been eroded by the events of the Korean War and his disillusionment with actually existing communism. In *Adventures of the Dialectic*, he is at times highly critical of Marx and yet he continues to question the relationship between Marx's philosophy and its contemporary iterations. What is consistent, however, between *Humanism and Terror* and *Adventures of the Dialectic* is Merleau-Ponty's commitment to a dialectical method. What we find in *Adventures of the Dialectic* is Merleau-Ponty's critique of the "ruin of the dialectic" vis-à-vis the "extreme objectivism" of revisionist Marxists, on one hand, and the "extreme subjectivism" of Sartre's "Ultrabolshevism," on the other.<sup>71</sup> Consequently, while he develops a critique of communism in *Adventures of the Dialectic*, he nevertheless attempts to retain the philosophical significance and critical force of the dialectic.

For Merleau-Ponty, the key to understanding the dialectic remains Marx's analysis of the commodity form in *Capital* and its interpretation in the work of Lukács. Here, as we saw in "Marxism and Philosophy," Merleau-Ponty draws once again on Marx's analysis of the peculiar ontological status of the commodity form, namely that it is a social relation between persons that appears in the form of a thing. Here he argues, once again, that with the rise of commodity production and the establishment of the commodity form as the universal category of social life, the peculiar ontological status of the commodity form impels a new philosophical

---

in no way affect the truth of that other Marxist idea that no matter how real and precious the humanism of capitalist societies may be for those who enjoy it, it does not eliminate unemployment, war, or colonial exploitation. Consequently, when set against the history of all men, like the freedom of the ancient city, it is the privilege of the few and not the property of the many. How do we answer the Indochinese or an Arab who reminds us that he has seen a lot of our arms but not much of our humanism?" *Ibid.*, 175.

71 Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 98.

method, one that reorients our understanding of the relationship between consciousness and matter, subject and object, and philosophy and history. Metaphysics is thereby supplanted by dialectic insofar as the object of inquiry must be understood as constituted rather than merely given and contemporary philosophical problems must be understood in reference their historical specificity, which within capitalist modernity means the socio-historical conditions of commodity production. As Merleau-Ponty puts it,

This exchange, by which things become persons and persons things, lays the foundation for the unity of history and philosophy. It makes all problems historical but also all history philosophical, since forces are human projects become institutions. Capital, says Marx in a famous passage is “not a thing, but a social relationship between persons mediated by things (*nicht eine Sache, sondern ein durch Sachen vermitteltes gesellschaftliches Verhältnis zwischen Personen*).” Historical materialism is not the reduction of history to one of its sectors. It states a kinship between the person and the exterior, between the subject and the object, which is at the bottom of the alienation of the subject in the object and, if the movement is reversed, will be the basis for the reintegration of the world with man.<sup>72</sup>

Historical materialism, then, according to Merleau-Ponty, has nothing to do with economic reductivism but rather with the historical-philosophical critique of the commodity form. This critique of the commodity form institutes a dialectical approach to the categories and problems of history and philosophy insofar as critique is the self-consciousness of the commodity form itself.

In *Adventures of the Dialectic*, Merleau-Ponty argues that Lukács retains and develops this fundamental insight of Marx’s philosophy. According to Merleau-Ponty, “Lukács is trying to preserve...a Marxism which incorporates subjectivity into history [*qui incorpore la subjectivité à l’histoire*] without making it an epiphenomenon.”<sup>73</sup> This means that consciousness is not simply an epiphenomenon but neither is it abstract and unconditioned.<sup>74</sup>

72 Ibid., 33.

73 Ibid., 41.

74 Ibid., 40. “This results from a double relationship that an integral

As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “What Lukács wishes to defend...is therefore always the idea that subjectivity is incorporated in history, not produced by it, and that history—generalized subjectivity, relationships among persons asleep and congealed in ‘things’—is not an *in-itself*, governed, like the physical world, by causal laws, but is a totality to be understood.”<sup>75</sup> Under the socio-historical condition of commodity production, consciousness is constituted by the commodity form and it is the self-consciousness of that form—i.e., the “self-consciousness of the object (*das Selbstbewusstsein des Gegenstandes*).”<sup>76</sup> Consciousness, Merleau-Ponty argues, thus refers to the “commodity seeing itself as commodity [*la merchandise s’apercevant comme merchandise*], [and] at the same time distinguishing itself from this, challenging the eternal laws of political economy, and discovering, under the supposed ‘things,’ the ‘process’ which they hide—that is to say, the dynamic of production, the social whole as ‘production and reproduction of itself.’”<sup>77</sup>

For Lukács, the proletariat is defined as the self-consciousness of the commodity form. As such, the “polarized existence” of the proletariat—an existence that cannot be resolved into subject or object—constitutes the standard of truth, i.e., the model of the relationship between subject and object.<sup>78</sup> On this model,

---

philosophy admits of between individuals and historical totality. It acts on us; we are in it at a certain place and in a certain position; we respond to it. But we also live it, speak about it, and write about it. Our experience everywhere overflows our standpoint. We are in it, but it is completely in us. These two relationships are concretely united in every life. Yet they never merge. They could be brought back to unity only in a homogeneous society where the situation would no more restrain life than life imprisons our gaze. All Marxism which does not make an epiphenomenon of consciousness inevitably limps, sometimes on one side, sometimes on the other.” *Ibid.*, 43

75 *Ibid.*, 69. As he puts it “For Lukács, [materialism] is a way of saying that all the relations among men are not the sum of personal acts or personal decisions, but pass through things, the anonymous roles, the common situations, and the institutions where men have projected so much of themselves that their fate is now played out outside of them.” *Ibid.*, 32.

76 *Ibid.*, 45.

77 *Ibid.*, 44-45.

78 The proletariat “furnishes this identity of subject and object that philosophical knowledge perceives abstractly as the condition of truth and the

the consciousness of the proletariat is neither simply ideologically determined by its material conditions nor does it transcend these conditions in a way that would provide consciousness with a synoptic view of history.<sup>79</sup> Truth is rather constituted by the “double relation or ambiguity of the dialectic [*la double rapport ou l’ambiguïté de la dialectique*]:” the ambiguity of the self-consciousness of the commodity form, the ambiguity of consciousness as constitutively embedded in history.<sup>80</sup> As such, the truth of the consciousness of the proletariat is inimical with a positivist view of the meaning or logic of history; the proletariat is not the truth of history in the sense of embodying an objectivist view of history as the necessary unfolding of a logical sequence of events. Rather, the consciousness of the proletariat refers to what Merleau-Ponty describes as the power of negation. As he states,

Nothing is further from Marxism than positivistic prose: dialectical thought is always in the process of extracting from each phenomenon a truth which goes beyond it, waking at each moment our astonishment at the world and at history. This ‘philosophy of history’ does not so much give us the keys of history as it restores history to us as permanent interrogation [*interrogation permanente*]. It is not so much a certain truth hidden behind empirical history that it gives us; rather it presents empirical history as the genealogy of truth. It is quite superficial to say that Marxism unveils the meaning of history to us: it binds us to our time and its partialities; it does not describe the future for us; it does not stop our questioning—on the contrary it intensifies it. It shows us the present worked on by a self-criticism [*autocritique*], a power of negation and of sublation, a power which has histori-

---

Archimedes’ point of a philosophy of history.” *Ibid.*, 45.

79 “Lukács rehabilitated consciousness in principle beyond ideologies but at the same time refused it the *a priori* possession of the whole...Most Marxists do exactly the opposite. They contest the existence of consciousness in principle and, without saying so, grant themselves the intelligible structure of the whole, and discover all the more easily the meaning and the logic of each phase in that they have dogmatically presupposed the intelligible structure of the whole.” *Ibid.*, 44.

80 *Ibid.*, 69.

cally been delegated to the proletariat.<sup>81</sup>

The proletariat, then, refers to the self-consciousness of the commodity form that is at the same time the interrogation of that form.<sup>82</sup> The truth that it grasps is not a positive reality beyond the given but rather the work of negation vis-à-vis the given.<sup>83</sup> This is why, for Merleau-Ponty, the dialectic ultimately refers to a method of permanent interrogation, i.e., the permanent self-interrogation of the given.

What Merleau-Ponty outlines in *Adventures of the Dialectic* as the “ruin of the dialectic” refers to those exegetes of Marx from Lenin to Sartre, who, he argues, reduce Marxism either to a philosophy of the object or subject.<sup>84</sup> According to Merleau-Ponty:

The ruin of the dialectic is accomplished openly with Sartre and clandestinely with the communists, and the same decisions that the communists base on historical process and on the historical mission of the proletariat Sartre bases on the nonbeing of the proletariat and on the decision which, out of nothing, creates the proletariat as the subject of history.<sup>85</sup>

On one hand, actually existing communism invokes a mechanistic and determinist model of history as alibi, reducing the consciousness of the proletariat to an epiphenomenon. The dialectic as permanent interrogation is supplanted by historical necessity, and the critique of capitalism devolves into ideology. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty argues that in *The Communists and Peace (Les Communistes et la Paix, 1952-1954)* Sartre disjoins consciousness from history such that the consciousness of the proletariat ultimately appears as spontaneous and unconditioned, and history as a product of volition.<sup>86</sup> As he puts it, “[o]ne feels that for Sartre the dialectic

---

81 Ibid., 56-57.

82 Ibid., 44-45. See above.

83 See, for example, Diana Coole’s reading of Merleau-Ponty’s critique of rationalism in *Merleau-Ponty and Modern Politics after Anti-Humanism*.

84 Barry Cooper describes this as a “fracturing of the dialectic into consciousness and things.” Cooper, *Merleau-Ponty and Marxism*, 131.

85 Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 98.

86 Ibid., 97-98.

has always been an illusion...Marxist action has always been pure creation.”<sup>87</sup> The problem, then, as Merleau-Ponty argues, is that both subjectivism and objectivism annul the critical force of the dialectic insofar as it is the ambiguity of consciousness and history—i.e., the ambiguity of the self-consciousness of history—that constitutes the dialectic as permanent interrogation. To resolve this ambiguity in favor of the subjective or objective is to abolish the dialectic itself.

What the materialist dialectic in fact presents in an asymmetrical negation, i.e., destruction without the generation of a positive supplement to fill in the gap of what it destroys. That is, the dialectic cannot be understood as a negation that simply generates a new, positive identity in its place. As he argues, “[w]hat then is obsolete is not the dialectic but the pretension of terminating it in an end of history, in a permanent revolution, or in a regime which, being the contestation of itself, would no longer be contested from the outside and, in fact, would no longer have anything outside it.”<sup>88</sup> The proletariat as the subject of materialist politics does not constitute a positive identity, a universal class that would take the place of a structural class-antagonism. Rather the proletariat, as we have seen, refers only to the peculiar ontological status that belongs to the self-consciousness of the commodity form (*l'autoconnaissance de la marchandise*, i.e., *l'autoconnaissance de l'objet*).<sup>89</sup> It is in this sense that the class-consciousness of the proletariat is just the self-consciousness of history, which is to say, history as permanent self-interrogation. The materialist dialectic thus remains critical and transformative not because it appeals to a position outside of history's self-consciousness of itself but because the asymmetrical structure of negation preserves the place of opposition.<sup>90</sup> As such, the proletariat is neither the subject nor the object of politics

---

87 Ibid., 98.

88 Ibid., 206.

89 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Les aventures de la dialectique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 62-63.

90 Barry Cooper offers a similar interpretation of the dialectic. See Cooper, *Merleau-Ponty and Marxism*, 131-133.

but rather marks the constitutive ambiguity of the dialectic that cannot be resolved in these terms.